

*Wire Diamonds*

(a novel)

&

Approaching the Apocalyptic: An exploration of apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic  
tropes in relation to *Wire Diamonds*

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### Note to examiners

This thesis includes the novel *Wire Diamonds* only up to the thesis word-count limit of 70,000 words. The entire novel is approximately 120,000 words. The critical reflection references parts of the novel not included in this thesis, and this is signalled in footnotes.

## Abstract

This practice-based thesis is formed of two interlocking pieces: *Wire Diamonds*, a novel, and a critical reflection which serves to excavate and investigate an important seam of influence on the novel's conception; a 'constellation' of contemporary apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic fiction authored by women. It engages in close reading of two key novels from this 'constellation'; Claire Vaye Watkins' *Gold Fame Citrus*, and Sophie Mackintosh's *The Water Cure*. It firstly offers a more detailed consideration of the etymology of the term 'apocalyptic' – explained by Trotta and Sadri as an 'uncovering' rather than 'catastrophe' – and considers how this can function as a speculative trigger for the reader. This bears especial relevance since the work produced by each of the authors that are a part of the loosely identified 'constellation' primarily reflect a contemporary fear of climate disaster. The critical portion of the thesis then addresses the relevance of an all-female cohort of writers, pointing to the mingling of certain themes and topics that are central to perspectives of disaster and societal collapse. These include vulnerability, complexity, and psychological interiority. The theoretical model that I have applied is wide-ranging and incorporates criticism relating to genre, environment, feminism, landscape and sociology. The reflective portion traces the way various apocalyptic tropes are approached in *Wire Diamonds* and considers the way in which the novel does not always conform completely to them. These themes include: abandoned places and lost things, bordered land, literary islands, destruction and wilderness, and a focus on coming-of-age-narratives. I conclude by suggesting that *Wire Diamonds* treats the apocalypse as something that can shift according to perspective, while also considering the fact that there is a degree of privilege that bestows mobility and facilitates the evasion of disaster. Finally, I offer a consideration of the relevance of the critical reflection not only to *Wire Diamonds* but also to my second novel-length project.

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*Wire Diamonds*



*Jesamy*

Summer started with the guy who hanged himself on the ferris wheel. That morning I woke Ash and Jakey at half four. I wanted to get to the beach by dawn and paddle our boards out across the bay, following the sunrise. We crept downstairs in the dark, trying not to wake our parents Malina and Stephen. I got my damp board-shorts off the washing line, and we left through the gate in the backyard. Outside, the air smelled of the fields baking hours in the hot wet night. It was too humid even for stars.

Flip-flops in hand, we walked barefoot through the sleeping village and left the garrison through the 16B gate. We crossed the empty main road then cut through the woods, running on a path of fallen eucalyptus leaves all the way to the sailing club.

Down there the boat sheds were just squares of shadows. Darkness clotted in the giant fig tree, and there wasn't enough breeze to clink the halyards of the boats. We walked down to the sea-edge and the sky was still the same black of the water, with the day in front of us holding its breath. The three of us stood in the silence with our toes pale on the shingle, shy to disturb the skin of the sea. None of us made a move to the sheds to get the boards and, now that we were there, I couldn't imagine the three of us out in the inky bay, tiny on top of a waiting deep. I realised then that dawn and sunrise might actually be two very different things.

In the end it was Ash who said 'What are we going to do then?'

I shrugged invisibly against his arm.

'Walk about a bit?'

Close enough to be my shadow, Jakey nodded. So leaving the boards in the shed we walked back through the club and east down along the sea-road skirting Fisherman's Cove.

The eucalyptus woods on our left were silent, and to the right the date palms on the beach were unmoving. The water of the cove shifted in increments up, increments down, not even tiny ripples breaking onto the pebbles. I'd never known a night so still.

We would normally have gone down the broken slipway to swim in the cove, but the water was so thick that we couldn't even see the white stripe of the limestone shelf through it. The church



above the tiny harbour was the only light in the cove, orange with tiny underlights against the terracotta walls. That's where we headed, passing the fishermen's huts and their painted boats beneath. Down there the air was rank with the bloodish smell of rust on the mooring chains, diesel, fish-guts and oil. Perched up on the rocks, the chapel was a miniature scale model of an orthodox cathedral, just large enough to house the portraits of the seventeen men drowned twenty years ago. It was sacred ground but it didn't stop the fishermen draping metres of rope off the church railings to dry.

The marble steps at the bottom of the rocks were slippery with salt, and our feet left grey streaks on them. I made the boys put their flip-flops on to walk across the peach tiles but we still trekked marks towards the door of the chapel. In the reflected underlighting from the walls the boys' faces were lit in the same planes and deep shadows as each other. If Ash weren't a head taller they could have been identical. The door to the chapel was locked, so I went over and leaned on the railings with my elbows on salty knots of rope. The boys joined me in our usual formation, one to each side, both close enough to touch if we breathed in at the same time. From our vantage there we could see out over the whole of Half Moon Bay, the strings of neon on the tourist strip, and the town further along dotted in yellow lights in the crook of the bay. In the far, far distance tiny pinpricks of red and white lowered themselves down to the airport. A mile behind us in Petrol Bay the power-station flashed and blinked. Those four candy-striped chimneys were our strange beacon of home, visible from the town and most of the hills behind it; as long as we could see those giant peppermint canes, we'd be ok. It seemed that that was where we'd been heading all along.

We climbed over the railings onto the rocks behind the chapel, and picked over them, tripping slightly in our flip-flops. The rocks flattened out into the carpark of the Officer's Club, which was empty apart from the manager's truck. I led the boys onto the tennis courts, and cut through them to the old cliff road behind Petrol Bay. It was unused now because of how close it was to the sharp drop to the water below, and the fact that every winter a few slabs of clay would crumple down from underneath the asphalt. The streetlights had been disconnected, so the night was much heavier there, the eucalyptuses drawing closer. The boys, with their dark hair over their faces,

were near invisible. None of us talked, and I had that strange queasy feeling of not being hungry yet. As we got closer, the air thinned out to the taste of metal keys in my mouth. I looked up and through the trees the chimneys loomed over us. Close to they weren't so perfectly candy-caned, because of the streaks of rust and black all down them. Their smoke drifted grey against the tarry sky. Overhead, wires crackled with a manic energy, feeding the pylons that stretched the length of the island. The compound floodlights glanced off the barbed wire and set up glitters on the water beyond the sea-wall.

We went through the car-park and bent around the beginning of the barbed wire fence to get out to the sea-wall. It was made of enormous stone blocks, each one the size of a car, and I climbed onto the first one, taking Jakey's hand to pull him up after me. Ash jumped up too, and took his flip-flops off to get a better grip against the smooth stone. Me and Jakey copied, and I took a running leap onto the next rock. In the acid light of the power-station floodlights there was only the white of the rocks and the glaring drops between them. The boys started racing, jumping between boulders sometimes metres apart. Watching them, I flinched at the idea of one of them tripping and falling through the rocks to the water. Then they left me behind, and I didn't like being alone with the dark water on one side and barbed wire on the other. So I ran after them. It was easier than walking, the cracks between slabs flashed blackly below me, and the buzzing smell of gas and petrol sped me on. We passed the chimneys, passed the huge drums and outbuildings, passed the desalination plant on the furthestmost point of the industrial headland. Then stopped short as the rocks of the sea-wall met the land again.

We'd forgotten the funfair had come back to the coast. It set up every summer on the scrubland past Petrol Bay, right in front of the local naval barracks for some reason, stinking of popcorn and diesel. We never went, but drove past it enough for it to be a part of the coastline. In the dead of the early day it meant nothing. No burnt sugar and fried-onion screaming, no coloured bulbs flashing on spilt drinks. Away from the floodlights the sky had lightened enough so that it was no longer quite night anymore, and the rides stood there in the shapes of machines, indistinguishable really from the chimneys and pylons of the station.

Without the people it was safe. We walked up to it. The fence around it was chicken-wire, less than that, we could have cut it with teeth or flint.

'Shall we go in?' I asked, but Ash was already wobbling a fence-post free. We all rolled under where the wire had pulled from the ground, and then we were in.

*Ash*

Jesamy weaves through the shuttered huts to the carousel and her and Jakey choose horses – Jakey on a chestnut tossing its mane, and Jesamy just ahead of him on a snowy pony. Her hair tipping down her back is the exact same white as its tail. You sit down instead on the wooden boards at the hooves of Jesamy's horse. It's too early and the boards are cooler than the air, you rest your head against her ankle and the toe of her flip-flop just touches your collarbone. A smell of rubber and dry earth hangs on it. Thinking of turning your cheek to the right just slightly so that her ankle-bone is resting smooth against your lips, what the fuck do you do now? Suck it? Bite? Then Jakey says *Ash* in that voice and it all changes.

At first you think the guy is a joke of the twilight, maybe a massive deflated balloon caught on the spokes of the ferris wheel. Jesamy is the first of you to react: she makes an *uh-uh* noise, then her flip-flop falls off down onto your knee as she slips from the horse, her damp thigh catching against the enamelled side in a squeak. Jakey wants to go closer, he leaves his horse and stumbles off the platform without moving his gaze from the wheel. You follow him, Jesamy hopping into her flip-flop behind you, all three feeling that dread of excitement of being where you shouldn't, not knowing what will happen to you when you know what you see.

The rope so straight and tight, and underneath flopped over himself is a man, with his back to you and head cricked at a sick angle. Go closer and he's got sandy hair regulation short. Khaki shorts and navy t-shirt. Desert boots with the toes just touching. One of them is wet and stinks of piss, for some reason you're embarrassed. He gets higher up the closer you get and you can't see his face. By the time you're under him his feet are only the soles of his boots and the rest of him masses bulky on top. There's no breeze, but the rope creaks almost too quiet to hear. You're scared he's going to fall off and land on you, he looks so much heavier than a person. Move round to see his face because what if you know him? But even if you did know him you wouldn't know him like this, grey skin, lips dark with blood, brown stains down from his nose and no-one behind the eyes. His t-shirt has the sailing club logo and that's what makes you turn around and take Jakey's slippery hand in your own. Try to take Jesamy's and meet it halfway to grasping yours,

walk to the fence and you all roll under the wire. You knock the fence-post back into its dry socket with the flat of your palm and when you've finished it's like you were never there.

The birds start their shrieking, or maybe they'd been shrieking already. The night has thinned into morning, soon it'll be half five and you'll never get back to the bay in time to paddle across it in the first shaft of sunrise. So cut up through the woods and walk the main road past the pylons to the 16B.

Back home you walk into your room that's exactly the same you left it an hour or so ago, but just a bit warmer. You get headfirst into bed under no sheets and sleep darker than a coma until your alarm at ten past seven.

*Jesamy*

The house hadn't registered our absence. The air was still as half suspended as we'd left it, the sour milk smell of a house filled with breath. The boys wavered up the stairs to bed together in the pale light, but I knew I wouldn't sleep.

I got a glass of water and went out to the veranda where I sat very still in the wicker chair with the red corduroy cushion; the foam inside it was damp and the cobwebs strung over the plumbago were beaded with dew. The air tasted of the insecticide they sprayed on the trees. I wondered for the first time what it felt like being dead. Was it like this? Unmoving, bare feet pressed against the wooden railings of the veranda, eyes wide open, the only person there to see the mist rise above the fields.

I wished that I still slept in the same bed as Ash, so that I could slot my limbs all down his in a way I hadn't done since I was a child, as fat and oblivious as a puppy. Whilst I sat on the wicker chair I closed my eyes and pictured myself one floor up and years away, with my shins pressed tight to the backs of his calves, my toes curling into the arches of his long brown feet, my belly flat all down his back, his dark hair loose down to his shoulders smelling of my apple shampoo, my arm dipping into his side and my fingers splayed across his chest just touching the silver coin of his St. Christopher. Lying with him there, alone on my chair, I felt the soft rise of his breath and a distant drumming started somewhere inside me, a warning perhaps, but of what I wasn't sure.

*Jakey*

Stephen always said 'don't look, because you can't change it'. So that time we saw a car crash on the motorway we all turned away as we drove past and Jesamy shut her eyes. I looked out of the other window and saw a woman at the side of the road staring back out at the wreck of cars, and the way she held her hand up to her mouth I knew for sure that someone had died. But we kept driving slowly through the traffic and got out of the car at the other end and just continued I suppose.

In the city last year we walked through these alleyways with kids escaped from the refugee camps that held their hands out like if you don't give them food they'll starve, and somehow we always got to the ends of the alleys, still with enough fat on us to live longer than we probably should. Don't look.

I looked once, when a man whipped his dog with its chain, right on the face, and I felt the closest thing I'd ever felt to heartbreak. I wished I hadn't looked, but it was done, and I still couldn't change it.

Looking at the man on the ferris wheel was a mistake, but it was like we couldn't help it. Maybe it's better that all three of us did, shared the looking, or maybe it just made the whole thing worse. I don't know. As soon as we turned back away from him I looked to Jesamy but her eyes were huge and blue with my same shock. I closed my eyes. Ash grabbed my hand and guided me over the scrub and even if I sometimes hopped when a burr got in my flip-flop he still held onto me, to help me not look. I couldn't change it.

After we got in me and Ash went upstairs to bed. It was like as I climbed each step my feet got thicker, my head kind of dropped and I felt almost as numb and heavy as the hangman looked. Still in my clothes I laid down on the futon on his floor so I didn't have to go to my room alone. Ash pulled his t-shirt off and crashed onto his bed and laid there with his face buried in his pillow and the rest of his long body laid out with knees and elbows and shoulder-blades sticking out. His silver chain had swung backwards so his St. Christopher was over one shoulder, and I watched the rise and fall of his brown back as he breathed himself to sleep. I eventually followed him, even though the sunlight leaked in through the skylights and heated up anything it touched.

At breakfast I didn't want to eat because I couldn't figure out what to do with the image of the hangman. I put my toast down and looked across the table at the yard and it was unreal, all plants spilling over themselves, and the sky so bright you could bounce a pebble off it. Ash and Jesamy sitting there looking like they just walked out of an advert with their sharp noses and wide mouths, hair mussed up and sulky in the sunlight. There was a bowl of peaches on the table. Kind of the same colour as the tablecloth, and fuzzy, and I knew if I bit into one it would be warm and perfect and it would always taste like this place and this time. There wasn't any room for the hangman in the yard, but he was there, just like the car crash where someone died, and the kids in the alley and the dog that was being whipped again and again and again in my head.



*Jesamy*

After I heard Stephen leave for work I got my uniform on and went out to breakfast with the boys in the yard. Malina had laid the table with the batik tablecloth and the square white plates stacked with buttered toast. There were cherries and peaches in a bowl and fresh jars of jam. She poured tea out, and I couldn't understand why she was being so involved. When she went back into the kitchen Ash raised his eyebrows at me.

'What's the occasion?'

I just shook my head. I was so blurred out that I couldn't even think. Malina came back out with a bowl that she put in front of me. It was two weetabix crumbled to rough dust and then covered with milk chilled in the freezer for an hour so that ice-chips had formed. There was a thin layer of sugar that had frozen to the milk and formed a shell. It was my favourite meal, perfect in all regards, and I had no idea my mother knew me that well. I looked at her when she moved to sit opposite me.

'Is today something special?' I quickly scanned my memory for our birthdays and realised I didn't know when her and Stephen's were.

'Your last day!'

Ash and I looked at each other, then at Jakey.

'Oh'.

Malina spoke again. 'So what do you have left?'

'Hm?'

'Exams? Do you have one left?'

I cleared my throat, 'yeah, art.' I was two-thirds of the way through the exam. Somewhere on a crumpled timetable it said the day's date and 'Art A2, part C 08.00-13.00'. I had spent ten hours building a city of crumpling skyscrapers in pen and ink on a 1.5m square canvas. Every line was made out of italicised text. Before I'd left yesterday I'd finished cutting a few windows out with an x-acto blade. Today I was supposed to paint a jungle weaving over the top of it, and through the windows I was going to thread leaves picked from the trees and shrubs outside the classroom. For

five hours I would sit or stand in an airconditioned room and listen to the White Album played quietly on repeat over the teacher's crackly CD player. I'd have to paint, but apart from that, nothing would be required of me.

I ate a few spoonfuls of the weetabix before the ice melted. It really was perfect.

'So, are you excited?'

Ash looked up from the cherry pips he was arranging on his plate and Jakey put his toast down although he'd only had one bite.

'Huh?' Because I'd spoken to her first, it seemed like I'd have to be the one that continued.

'About your last day?'

We were silent for a moment. I looked quickly at Jakey who was hiding his eyes behind his hair and had started to tear his toast apart. Ash actually shook his head in disbelief. I couldn't understand how she was asking this in front of Jakey, as if she had no idea what it meant. Ash picked a piece of toast off the plate in the middle and stuffed it into his mouth as he stood up. He jerked his head towards the door.

'We'd better get a shift on if we're going to be on time.'

I stood up too. 'Yeah, Jakey, are you coming?'

He seemed relieved to leave the toast behind, and followed me as I walked to the kitchen still eating from the bowl. Before I went through the door I turned and saw Malina still sitting there in the middle of all the food she'd prepared, and I felt a twinge of guilt through the anger.

'Thanks, by the way.' I said. 'For the breakfast.'

She looked up at me and smiled.

In the kitchen there were the usual coolbags lined up for us, and as the boys took theirs I drank the dregs of the sugar-milk from my bowl and left it in the sink.

When we walked out to the front door I looked quickly out to the yard and she was still sitting there at the table drinking a cup of tea. I had no idea what she would be doing with the day,

and wanted to go out there and apologise, for how we'd left her, and for the fact that I barely knew her and didn't know how to know her, but I just followed the boys outside.

As we walked down the hill into the valley, Jakey was slightly ahead of me with his thin shoulders pulled together through his t-shirt. I brushed my arm up against his and peered down into his face. His eyes were dark and he looked on the verge of tears. His mouth trembled as he looked back at me and then at Ash and said, 'so are you?'

I linked arms with him. 'Are we what?'

'What Malina said? Excited? To leave?'

I could feel Ash looking at me over Jakey's head, and I replied, 'Of course we're not excited to be leaving you! But I am excited that we've got three months now, no school, no exams, no nothing. Just loads of time to hang out together.'

He brushed away a tear with the back of his hand, and I squeezed his arm, 'yes? Just us three to have a lovely summer together? Think about that chickling, and don't think about the future because it'll ruin what we have now.'

He nodded and we jumped over the storm-drain and climbed the steps to the road. It occurred to me briefly that at some point the hangman would have to be found and put into an ambulance and driven slowly and quietly up this road to the med-station. I wondered whether it had already happened, but there was a soft patch of guilt about Malina to probe, and some weetabix to scooch out of my back teeth and an exam to finish, and Jakey to console, so I didn't mention it. I saw Ash look down the road to Main as if waiting for the slow procession too, and then he took our bags off us and chucked them up the limestone cliff-face that led to Poles. We picked our way up the limestone, bits kept crumbling off when the rains came in or when kids kicked rocks out accidentally, so the path was always changing. Poles was at the top of the cliff up a few steps, and it was cool and empty at that time. It was just a few picnic benches shaded beneath some corrugated tin sheets propped up with green poles, but it was the only place in school that caught a breeze when the whole island was hot and still. It belonged to us, but not for much longer. One

more day and then some other kids would fight it out to be King of Poles. Or maybe it would be a democracy. After a two year reign I found it hard to care.

My exam didn't start for another half an hour, so we both walked Jakey to the minibus for his summer day camp. There were a few kids already lined up in the carpark with their backpacks and coolbags, but when they saw us coming they looked down or away. They wouldn't talk to him whilst we were there, but sometimes it helped if we lingered, to ram home the point that he was ours. It always helped him stand up a bit straighter.

'What's it today, Little?'

'Mosque, I think' he muttered, whilst Mr. Tudor and Mr. Casey came out of the office with cups of coffee and walked towards the minibus. Mr Tudor was my favourite, and the only reason I'd kept playing piano.

'Jazz!' Mr. Tudor yelled across the kids, 'are you joining us?'

I smiled at him, 'sorry sir, got my last exam today.'

He handed Mr. Casey the bus keys. 'Jump in, Mark. Which is it?'

'Art.'

'Ah', he pulled a serious face. 'Colouring-in. An important life skill Jasmine.'

I snorted.

He swung himself into the bus and started the engine with a squealing cough and almost immediately Mozart's Requiem started booming from the speakers.

'All aboard me hearties.' He winked at me from the front window. 'Knock 'em dead kid.'

'Will do sir.'

'Toodlepippins!' he shouted, then shuddered the bus into first and pulled out onto the main road.

I walked in silence with Ash to my art exam. I was still baggy with tiredness, and neither of us could mention the hangman. He handed my coolbag to me outside the door and said 'see you after.

Good luck.'

I yawned, 'yeah', and went in.

*Ash*

There's nothing left to do here now. You move through the day slowly, playing a half-arsed game of footie with the others who have finished, waiting on Jesamy to finish her exam. For the last two hours you're sitting on the upper balcony of the art block, watching the sea turn from flat to choppy wondering whether you'll get any waves. When she comes out of the classroom half an hour early she's paler than usual, freckles stamped on her nose and purple patches under her eyes. She walks over to you and looks out.

*No waves yet?*

*Nope. How did it go?*

*Alright. Shall we get some strawberry laces? Old times' sake?*

The place is deserted, lower school on summer camp and everyone else in exams or gone home. You walk together to the tuck shop and knock on the glass. It's closed, but Mat opens it and smiles when he sees you.

*Last day huh?*

*With any luck.*

*Leaving gift, from us,* and hands you a fistful of strawberry laces in a napkin and a sausage roll.

You drift over to the wall and take your PE shirt out of your bag, roll it into a pillow for you to share. Midday and the wall's too hot to touch. You sit swinging your legs, burning them on any edge they graze. Jesamy keeps her face inside a veil of uncombed hair, white flitters of it brush against your arm leaving the skin tingling. There's something you're not talking about, some heaviness in your stomach that you don't know what to call, until he swings in from the top of your head, sounding like the creak of rope with the tips of his desert boots just touching. **Hangman.** You don't dare think it any louder in case Jesamy hears so shake your head and look out over the valley. The hills all falling down together and at the bottom the rugby pitches, sprinklers spraying water over them in clicks. The blue-rectangle swimming pool, filled with kids from the primary

school. Up the steps on the furthest side the school annexe-buildings they closed when student enrolment dropped below a hundred. Jesamy hooks a leg up to tighten her shoelace for a second, her skirt flares away and you see a flash of her knickers, black, quickly eat two strawberry laces and start on the sausage roll before you've even swallowed them.

*They've got eyeballs in them.*

*Huh?* Pastry puffs out of your lips as you say it.

*Those sausages,* she nods to the remains in your hand, *Jakey ate one and found a bit of eyeball in it.*

Shake your head. *It was probably a chunk of gristle. Or the ink from the tattoo. You know, in the pig's ear? I ate a bit of ink once I think. At least it's actually from pig.*

*At least there's that.*

*Want a bit?*

*I'm fine thanks.*

She jumps down onto the path and starts following the lizard that skittered away when she landed. You watch her for a second, those long hard legs in the skirt that's an inch too short for regulation. Then you jump down and join her, grab the t-shirt and knot it round your neck where it absorbs the sweat already creeping under your hair.

You follow the lizard for a while, it flickers in and out of burrs and pebbles, startles another lizard and you twist to follow that one, meeting Jesamy when both dart down the same hole in the limestone. The sun pounds. You look up and you're at the rusted irrigation wheel dug into the rock of the valley. The school is up the hill now, too many steps in the heat for no reason. She looks at you, her eyes black rings around chlorine blue. Bites the skin next to her thumbnail.

*Are we gonna go back to sign the shirts and stuff?*

You think for a second of felt-tips on Jesamy's shirt, people lifting her hair touching her neck, holding her arms, breathing into her ear, names etched across her front and back, some joker trying to trace his hands round her tits.

*Nah. Not sure I give a shit.*

*Me neither she says, and your heart stutters a second with relief.*

*That's it then? you say.*

*That's it, and you both cross the road for home.*



*Jakey*

On the last day of summer camp we went to the mosque on the salt-lake. Obviously no one was that into it in the beginning, because we're the military, our school sports teams are called *Saracens* and *Crusaders* for fuck's sake, and one kid asked the teachers 'what has this got to do with us?' When he said that, Mr. Tudor turned around at the front of the bus and told us that the mosque is one of the most important sites in Islam, and if it wasn't too much hassle, could we please respect something other than ourselves? This is literally the way he talks, funny and also strict and like he knows exactly how we think. The sun was blasting down and the aircon packed up on the bus so we had to have the windows open and everything in our lunch-boxes melted, even stuff like bananas, which you wouldn't expect. When we got to the salt-lake I was disappointed, because there were no flamingoes like there are in winter. The whole thing shimmered like silver water, but closer up it was just a heat haze over a big crust of salt. On the other side the mosque was in this little oasis of palms and cypresses, and with its domes and minaret poking out it looked like something from a story. I completely forgot which country we were even in, and it reminded me that the island didn't really belong to any of us at all.

The minute we stepped out of the bus a bloke with a beard and glasses came up to us. One of the kids whispered 'he's wearing a dress' and I thought what a fucking idiot, but then maybe he'd never lived off a garrison his whole life, or ever spoken to anyone who wasn't white. The Imam brought us into the shade of a stone gazebo thing to tell us about the mosque before we just blundered in like chickens. He was so gentle, and when a girl from my class said 'who's Mohammed sir?' and someone else replied 'Muslim Jesus, dickhead' he smiled and didn't shout at them even though Mr Casey shuffled really awkwardly and Mr. Tudor looked like he was going to punch someone. The story was actually kind of scary. Apparently Mohammed's aunty fell off her donkey at this exact spot, broke her neck and died, and got buried there. They put one boulder at her feet, one at her head, and the third floated in the air above her. Hundreds of years later some dervishes lived there and had visions about her, and then they built her a tomb. A mosque was built around it, and people from everywhere came to stay there and get healed. The Imam told us that his grandmother and her sisters had made the eight-hour journey to the mosque every month,

like a mini-Hajj, and took food for the visitors. Then he said that her dying wish was to go back to the mosque one last time, but the border had been drawn across the island, and she never returned. When he said this I felt a bit emotional, especially when he got out a watermelon and cut slices off for us all. I had never been so ashamed of the colour of my skin, even though I'm not totally clear on who drew the line and when, or whether it was something to do with us at all.

This little chat meant that when we actually went into the mosque, we were ready to take it in properly. We took our shoes off and the girls put cloaks over their clothes and hair and then we washed our hands and feet and faces from a big stone trough. It wasn't as fancy as the mosques I'd been to before, it was just plain decoration, no tiles or chiselled stone or anything. More like a church really. It smelt of carpet and sweat and wood-polish. There was just one thing that made it special. When we walked through I saw a door on the far side. It was open, and through it all you could see was the salt-lake. The door was in an arch-shape and it kind of vibrated with the heat outside. You couldn't even see the sky, just white and glaring salt. It was silent but roaring, and it made me go quiet right down to the bones.

When we were shown to the tomb, there was scaffolding connecting to the floating stone and everyone was disappointed, they'd wanted to see a miracle. The Imam just smiled at this. I guess he was well beyond needing to see proof. When I was there, I dunno. I'm not sure I needed to see it either. Because everything's a bit impossible isn't it? Who's to say that we know all that there is to know, who's to say rocks can't float?

Afterwards we went outside with our clipboards to the path down to the lake. We were meant to go onto the salt-crust and write down things that we noticed. There were lots of things I noticed, like how the world was divided perfectly in half between the white lake and then suddenly the blue sky. And also how under the salt it was actually hot wet ooze that covered my flipflops, and the salt only held if you walked stiffly with flat feet. I saw some bones buried in the ooze, that still had flesh and blood on them, but there were no insects. Further out there were actually the prints of flamingo feet frozen into the salt, which made me a bit staggered. When someone shouted out that they'd seen them I was irritated, like I owned the prints. I ended up walking out, because I was sure that I'd seen the shore on the other side, in a wavy line. The salt had dried in

big rings, so it looked like the surface of the moon, and I followed the seams of salt so that I didn't crack the surface. One of the salt-rocks was the size of my first and I picked it up and held it. I licked it and it tasted more sandy than I'd expected. The roar of the sun had drowned out the chatterings of everyone else, and when I thought to look back, they were tiny and blurred. The mosque and the trees and the people all swayed like the flame of a candle. I continued walking out. I had the feeling that the shore wasn't actually the shore at all, but just the join of salt and sky, and I really wanted to get to it and walk straight up into the blue.

I think I must have already been a bit dehydrated at this point. I could hear the salt in my temples and suddenly I loved the lake so much I would have happily died there. It was talking to me with the voice of a big God telling me stuff that wasn't in words. I wanted to lie down on it but I kept walking. I don't know how long for.

Then there was the flapping sound of someone running towards me, and when I recognised him it was Mr. Tudor, bright red and sweating into his moustache saying 'Jakey!' He had a little towel and a bottle of water and chucked the towel over my head so the salt voice quieted a bit. I don't think he knew what else to say to me, and I kind of mentioned how white it was. He was like, 'yep, it is. How about a bit of water Jakey?' The water was warm and made me feel a bit queasy. I did a few quiet burps then Mr. Tudor said 'a bit more Jakey then we'll head back.' He was saying my name a lot. We walked back, but I didn't feel that I had much choice in the matter. Having a bit of shade from the towel made me able to see things better, like my toes and fingers, which were pink and swollen double their normal size. And the salt-rock which glittered, and was an even more perfect white than I could have imagined. I dropped it so that no one else would ever see it.

Afterwards when we got back to the car-park no-one talked to me and I struggled a bit to put myself back into the land of strawberry laces and the kids chatting about whether they were going to the pool in the afternoon. There was a kind of heavy emptiness in my chest which made me wish for things I didn't know. Whilst everyone else went to go to the toilets and the ice-cream van and the teachers fuffed about with clipboards, I went and sat under an olive tree with my back to the loud salt. I drew a couple of triangles and stars in the dust, and snagged my fingernail

against a little buried stone. I kept my head down and tried to concentrate on breathing in the air that was warm and buzzed with the insects in the bushes. I was homesick for exactly where I was. It was a relief to get back on the bus in a way, and drive on the motorway past that weird building that's been a petrol station and a karate hall and a 99 cent shop in the past three years.

I suppose the best bit about the whole thing was getting home and it was just me and Jesamy in the house because Ash had gone up to the top of camp to play football. Whilst I had a shower she got us a bowl each of tinned peaches (Ash is the only one of us that can cook) and we went out to the yard to eat. We sat down in the exact same places we'd sat in the morning. It felt too early and too late for this to still be the day that we went down to the beach. For a second the hangman flickered completely black into the air between us. We both saw him there but there was nothing to do but ignore him.

She asked me how the mosque was, and I started trying to describe the salt-lake talking to me and the knowing that if I died there it wouldn't be too terrible. I stumbled on, and told her about the emptiness after the lake, where I struggled to put myself back together again. When I said that she leaned forward and pinned me down with her eyes, in the way that she does.

'Did you also feel that it was where you'd been heading all along without knowing it?'

When I said, 'kind of', she smiled.

'When I was there it felt that the lake itself was somehow the point, and that the mosque was just there marking it. I don't know, it had this weird pull on me. When I actually got out there on the salt it was clear that suddenly, here was God. And I wasn't surprised, even though it was much scarier and much more beautiful than I'd been expecting.'

When she said this I knew more than ever that she was the special one of us, the one that knew things at the root of what they were. I said this, or some blumbled version of it.

She smiled at me. 'Thanks, chicken.'

She stood up to take the bowls back to the kitchen and kissed my head as she went past. I got up from the table where the wood slats of the chair had been pressing into my legs, and like that exhaustion came along and cuffed me on the head hard. It was tiredness like I could barely

remember, and the hammock with its glaring colours in the sunlight was too hot to lie in. I passed Jesamy when I walked through the kitchen and she pointed to the stairs and said 'up'.

*Jesamy*

Me and Jakey laid on my bed underneath the ceiling fan, listening to its clicking whirrs. I'd brought up a bottle of frozen water, and hugged it until it hurt, occasionally rolling it down my arms and, flinchingly, onto the backs of my knees. The dark grape walls of my room absorbed the light that poured in from the skylights, and Jakey tipped slowly slowly into sleep. I watched his breath thicken into the back of his throat and his eyelids flutter closed, showing the fine veins through the skin. The fingers of his left hand flickered open and closed faster than he'd have been able to when awake. I wished I could follow him to wherever he'd gone. It would be somewhere cool and blue, subterranean, where fish darted into rocks and any danger came slowly with the sound of an outboard motor. If I closed my eyes, a rope was cut with a grunt and a slack body fell down onto a sling held out by firemen. The body hit the canvas and was hidden from me, but I knew the patches on his skin where the blood had pooled purple, and I knew the exact look in his eyes. Confused, like no one had told him yet that he was gone.

I opened my eyes to the dreamcatcher above my head. The turquoise feathers spun lazily in the breeze from the fan. There was a dark patch on the bed where the bottle of water had started to melt. I opened it and drank but it was less than a mouthful, so I rolled off the bed and went downstairs for an ice-tea.

Malina had got home from wherever she'd been, and was unpacking plastic bags of food on the countertop. She only half-turned as I came into the kitchen. Her eyes were red and she was even more shut in than usual. She didn't say anything to me apart from 'hello' but I knew that she'd heard about the hangman and knew she would have to leave it to Stephen to tell us. I got a can of tea out of the fridge, and hung about uselessly for a few seconds, trying to intercept the milk and butter and put them in the fridge for her, but we both just felt a bit awkward and I ended up leaving her down there starting dinner.

Upstairs my room was thick with Jakey's sleep and as I laid down with my face muffled in my slightly damp pillow, I hoped that I would be pulled under too.

The hangman's wife would be with him now. Someone would be holding her as she cried or shouted at him. She'd be touching his hair, and picking up his heavy hand so as to feel his fingers

between hers again. She might have tried to hold him, with her head on a chest that was just bone and meat now. Someone would have washed the blood from where it had run from his nose and into his mouth. I didn't know whether they cleaned the teeth of dead people, but maybe they'd be doing that, or packing cotton between his lips so that his smile wasn't too terrible. His wife fell back into the arms of whatever social worker was with her, and I jerked awake. For a sudden sweating moment, I wondered whether I would throw up. Jakey moaned softly as I sat up and breathed deeply with my head down. The nausea passed over me in a big trembling wave and then I was just starving and so, so tired. Ash would be coming home soon, and if he watched over me I'd be able to sleep.

Ash

When you come down from the pitches Malina is in the kitchen and it's garlicky and warm in there. You're feeling generous so say *something smells good* and she smiles small back at you as you swing upstairs. As you get up to the shower-room Jesamy's coming out her room and walks tired-eyed straight at you and you catch her in a hug that's almost painful. She says close in your ear, *they've got him*, and for a second you can't think who *he* is, but the sickly look of her reminds you and it brings you back down from football and sunshine and garlic and her unexpectedly in your arms. The sweat that'd felt so good skirting down into your eyes and sticking your shirt to your back is greasy now and cold. You need to be in water but can't leave her alone. Go get a pillow from your bed and put it down on the landing outside the shower-room, sit her down on it with her back against the bannister railings. As you go into the shower-room, you keep the door open halfway, but draw the curtain across. You can talk from here.

*Where's Jakey?*

*Asleep in my room.* There's an edge to her voice, not anger but something worse, desperation or nearly like it.

You shake your head. When you'd left that afternoon to go up the pitches, she'd said *you go, I'm fine. I'll have a nap and be here for when Jakey gets home.* What stupid fucking selfish part of you thought that she'd be ok on her own? Reef your t-shirt and shorts off and step out of your boxers. Chuck them out from behind the curtain and switch the water on.

*Did you sleep?* knowing the answer already.

She doesn't reply. Alone looking after Jakey and you're out skipping round a ball like a child. As quiet and controlled as you can, you smash your fist down onto your thigh, it doesn't hurt enough but it'll have to do. Cover the sound by knocking a bottle of shower gel off the rack.

*What was that?*

*Just knocked the...stuff off.* No response. *Do you mind if I use your shampoo?*

*Get your own, man.*



*Cool, cheers.*

Squeeze a blob out on your hand and lather it into your hair and armpits and it smells so good. The water turns hot then cold, and that's good too. With the apple smell of her all around washing over you the love for her bubbles up bigger and darker and stronger than before. A battle feeling, a film feeling, a riding to your death just for the glory of it feeling. You can't describe it at all. But you won't leave her alone again, you promise yourself that. And her too.

*It won't happen again, Jesamy. I swear.*

No answer. Thumb a bit of shampoo out of the corner of your eye and look round the curtain. She's gone, and the cushion's gone, but there's a smell of leather and coffee and a dead silence that wasn't there before. Stephen's home.

*Jakey*

When I opened my eyes it was to the thunder-cloud purple of Jesamy's bedroom walls. She wasn't there, but with her bookshelves and different coloured pillows and stripy sheets, it felt like she was. If I could get her to leave her paintings on the wall, and maybe her turquoise clock, I could move in here when she left for uni and feel like she hadn't gone. The room smelled of garlic, so it was nearly dinnertime. I hoped that it was Ash cooking, because I could eat when it was just us three. As soon as Stephen got involved I forgot how to chew and swallow. But when I stepped outside the room to go for a wee, I knew just like that that Stephen was home.

When I pushed open Ash's door the aircon was on, and Jesamy was lying with her back on the floor and her legs resting straight up the wall. From that perspective they were about six feet long, and not much darker than the white paint. Ash was propped on his bed with wet hair and just shorts on. As I walked in, Jesamy held her hand out in the air without opening her eyes, and I went in and held it a second before lying down next to her.

'They've got him,' she said.

'The hangman?' I realised that I might have already known that.

'Yeah.'

'So he's safe now?'

'Yes.'

She dropped her arm back over her head and I was lying so close that when I turned to look at her, my face was in her armpit. It sounds gross, but I've always liked to snuggle in like that. It's not a sweaty horrible smell, but just a warmer, more intense version of what she already smells like. Salt, fabric conditioner, and something green and fresh, like rosemary or lavender from the plants outside.

'I think they'll tell us tonight.'

I tried to get my head round that. 'Oh. So we don't know anything?'

'No.'

Ash spoke. 'It's best if we don't. We don't want any questions about where we go or when or whatever. Don't want them to lock the doors.'

Me and Jesamy were silent. There was a time when she was about my age when she sleep-walked, and one night she ended up outside on the scrub by the swings. Malina found her and brought her home, but after that Stephen started locking the doors at night and hiding the keys. She used to scream in her sleep when she couldn't get out, which was a fucking horrible thing to wake up to, but after a while she stopped screaming, and stopped walking, and they stopped locking the doors. The idea now of being in a house with locked doors at night made me feel like I couldn't breathe and, from the look on Jesamy's face, she felt the same.

Ash got up from the bed and went to his cupboard. I watched as he pulled a t-shirt over his head and all the muscles in his arms and his back were perfect. I wondered when I was going to start looking like him.

He came over and stood above us, then held both his hands down.

'Shall we go?'

I took one hand and Jesamy the other and he pulled us both to standing at the same time, like a magic trick.

Dinner was garlic chicken and potatoes and green beans. Maybe it was because of the way that I got paralysed around Stephen, or maybe it was because fifteen hours earlier I'd looked at my first dead body, but I had never been so aware before that chicken is meat. I put a forkful of nice salty buttery garlicky chicken in my mouth and started chewing, and sooner or later all those flavours fell away, and I was scissoring a grey piece of muscle between my teeth. I chewed and chewed and chewed because my throat had closed and there was no way I could either swallow or spit it out. A tiny snicket of gristle caught on a tooth and I gagged. I reached for my water and filled my mouth with that, so that the meaty pap was diluted enough for a trickle of it to go down my throat. My brain went into high alert that I was going to swallow a bit of body, and that was all that I could deal with. Thankfully my cup was coloured glass, so as subtly as I could with my heart pounding and a sick feeling in my face, I eased the mouthful of meat-water back into the cup. I put

it where I couldn't see the flecks of chicken, then put a safe clod of potato in my mouth. The thrumming of blood in my neck had died down a bit by then, and I was just left with a sweaty forehead and slightly trembling hands. I looked up for a second, and Jesamy was staring at me from across the table and did a tiny smile, then flickered her glance to Ash next to me. Without skipping a beat or looking at me, he speared the rest of my chicken with his fork and angled the whole piece into his mouth before Stephen looked up.

That whole time, Malina and Stephen had been eating quietly opposite me. Malina with her head bowed over her plate so all I could see was the white strip of her parting through her dark hair, and her knife and fork darting about like nervous birds. Stephen cut things into precise pieces and loaded his fork each time with every item. Then once it was on, he'd pop it in his mouth and look directly up at us, with those see-through blue eyes. He wouldn't say anything, just look. Which was usually the point at which my chewing would go all numb and stupid. With parents like them it was no surprise that the three of us ate quickly or not at all. Normally, once we'd eaten, we'd get up and take our plates into the kitchen and wash up before Malina and Stephen were finished, and then head outside or upstairs with a sighing out feeling of relief. But this time we knew we had to wait until Stephen told us.

I'd eaten my beans and half of the potatoes before he took a sip of wine, cleared his throat, and spoke.

'There was a bit of an accident last night. Down at the fairground.'

We all looked up at him.

'Yeah?' Ash said.

'Yes.' He did another of his fork-loadings. 'There'll be some officials buzzing around down there so it's best if you stay at Fisherman's Cove and the sailing club for a while.'

'No bother.' Ash said. 'What happened? One of the rides?'

Stephen shook his head whilst he carefully ate his latest fork-load.

'No, nothing like that. It was after it shut for the night. One of the junior lads got in some kind of trouble.'

'What trouble?' Jesamy said. 'Will he be ok?'

She had a look of concern on her face that was so real I got a mad urge to giggle and give the game away.

Stephen did a little cough.

'No. No. I'm afraid that they couldn't do anything for him by the time the ambulance arrived.'

We were all silent for a moment as we pretended to let it sink in. Suddenly it wasn't funny anymore. Who had called the ambulance? And when? Was he dead when we were there? Could we have cut him down somehow and hit him on the chest and breathed into his bloody lungs and made him come back? Jesus Christ. Was this our fault?

There were potatoes in my mouth and this time no amount of water would help me swallow. I spat the potatoes in my hand and pushed my chair back and ran into the house. But my knees were rubber, and there was a rushing black feeling in my heart up to my head blanking everything out so the carpet buckled under me. I hit the hard edge of a wall with my elbow, and that toppled the rest of me. Behind me arms caught me around the chest and white hair drifted over my face. She bundled me across the living room and out the porch doors before I started to cry.

*Ash*

You're left with the two of them at the table, Malina doing micro-jerks between trying to go out to Jakey and staying put where she belongs. Stephen stares at a spot just behind your head and says *she just encourages him*, then continues eating, moustache bristling up and down. It's all caught up with you now, the morning and the hangman and exams and school suddenly finished and the heat of the pitches and the shower that's tired you out. The light behind the yard walls is a sleepy peach and the air is warm, you could lay your head down in the bowl of potatoes and close your eyes and turn all of this off now. Instead, you eat as fast as possible, half a chicken-breast, three new potatoes and a forkful of beans all in one mouthful, barely swallowing before wedging the next lot in. When the plate is just smears of butter you stand still chewing and take Jesamy's and Jakey's plates with your own. Sling them down in the sink and then head through the porch gate onto the scrub to see where they've got to.

Just out to the swings. Sharing one, Jesamy standing up on the seat, and Jakey sitting on her bare feet. She's moving them by holding the chains and leaning right back until her hair dangles a foot from the ground. They're not getting far because Jakey's scruffing his toes into the dirt below, and you know how good that feels, the chalk milled to dust, cool and soft at this time. They look up as you approach, and he's red around the eyes but not crying anymore. Jesamy fixes you with a stare.

*Jakey thinks we could have saved the hangman. I told him he was dead already and there was nothing we could have done.*

You sit down on the swing to the left of them and sigh. You're going to have to give him a biology lesson that no fourteen year old is ready for.

You start with the spine, and what happens if the cord is severed. Jesamy edges her feet out from under Jakey and jumps off the swing. She goes to the end of the swing set and holds the two brace poles, then runs her feet up the chain of your swing, gripping it with her toes. She manages to fold her body upside-down, and hooks her knees around the poles, then lets go with her hands and dangles down. She stays there throughout asphyxiation and how long it takes a brain to die. When you get to the colours of death, she swings her feet neatly over her head and

lands beside you. Her face is dark purple, but in a second the blood drains away and she's white again. It happens so quickly Jakey doesn't see, and you're glad. She stands behind you and pushes you slowly, you can feel every bone in her hands as they start out flat-palmed and peel away to just her fingertips.

*The moral of the story Jakey, she says, sick of the tale you're telling, and you are too, there was nothing left for us to save.*

Ok, he says. Who knows if he's convinced.

Jesamy sits on the swing next to you, and for a while you all sway slowly, with the squeak of the chains overhead. Night switches on around you, humidity rolling into the valley at the same time as the dark, and the bread smell of the fields rising with the cicadas. Occasionally there's the blur of a bat against the sky.

Jakey speaks into the very loud silence. *What's gonna happen now then?*

Can't tell how big that question is, so shrug, and look at Jesamy. She shrugs too.

*Summer, probably.*





*Jesamy*

We woke up in the morning and it was the holidays, with only one hurdle left before the months stretched out before us sun-blurred and easy. A barbeque for everyone on our patch, and whoever else was important. The garrison was the kind of place where the smell of coals and meat drifted down the streets from one house or another, from April to October. They were loosely organised evenings that sometimes spilled out onto the empty roads in a street party, and kids roamed freely between them depending on what was for dessert. They were designed so that people who were only going to stay on island for eighteen months were immediately folded into the fabric of the garrison, taking the place of the people living in their house before them, and forgotten straight after their replacements arrived. Snuggled in the corner of the garrison before the 16B gate and the fields, our village of Officers had better longevity than the lower ranks, and I think the people there were genuinely friends. Stephen and Malina went to every single party, clamped together hand-in-hand, and Stephen patrolled the borders of emotion and opinion. Obviously our annual barbeque was the opposite to all the others, in that it was meticulously planned and executed, with an approved but unspoken guest list. No one from the lower villages was invited, as Stephen was contractually forbidden from socialising lower-rank. He had no problem with socialising upper-rank though, and the Commander had been to a few of our parties. Me and Ash and Jakey had to go to every one, and smile and interact with Stephen and Malina, taking care not to show how oil-and-water our existence was in that house. And we always fell under Stephen's gaze before the party started. There was a certain way that he wanted us to look, and our everyday uniforms of shorts and old band t-shirts didn't fit with his vision.

The house was filled with cooking smells from the early morning onwards, despite the fact that everyone would arrive with a dish. Malina was in the kitchen surrounded by an incomprehensible collection of food-stuffs: cream and olive oil and sugar and chicken breasts and bread and peanuts and rice and pineapple. I think she was trying to make several things all at once, to add credence to the 'potluck' theme, but it looked too desperate for that. The cleaner had already been, but still we were pressed into service by Stephen, picking leaves out of flowerbeds and nudging tealights into the gaps in the yard-walls. He stalked around the house from midday

on, shifting coasters around and nipping dead-heads from flowers. But then the house looked so clean and hard-edged that he went after himself, knocking the occasional picture askew and brushing petals from a flower so that they landed artfully on the floor. At one point he went into the shed and got Ash's skateboard out and left it under the washing line in the yard. It was pathetic, this building of a stage-set. Whatever happened once people started to arrive would be out of his control and I don't think he could handle that.

At five he sent us upstairs to wash and change so that we'd be 'ready'. Ash had to present himself for inspection first, but his board shorts were deemed 'too casual.' When he came back down in his khaki school shorts Stephen seemed ever tenser.

'Come on, Ash. Frame,' he said. 'You look like you're on your way to an exam. Put something normal on!'

He came down in his denim shorts and a navy short-sleeved shirt and Stephen seemed satisfied. I went next, and Stephen nodded at my first choice, a sun-bleached blue and apricot cotton dress that was both short and floaty. It washed me out and pulled out the knobbles in my shoulders and elbows. In it I looked more fragile, but Stephen preferred me like that. He just told us 'brush your hair, the pair of you.' We found a comb in the kitchen and stood there brushing our wet hair out under the fan in the living room waiting for Jakey to come down. He swung down the stairs in a similar outfit to Ash, but Stephen didn't like it looking too curated. He sent him back upstairs, and after a few tries of things Stephen didn't like, I felt that he was losing confidence, so went up with him to try to find something. We spotted some black denim shorts at the back of his cupboard which were a bit too tight, but fitted the bill of 'natural', when paired with a white Quicksilver shirt and my old navy flip-flops. We walked down together, and when Stephen saw the outfit, he frowned slightly.

'Something's still off.'

He appraised him, rubbed his hand over his own pale crew cut and then said. 'It's your hair. Needs cutting.'

At that, Jakey looked at me in dismay. He was growing it out of the little boy's style he'd had for the last few years and it had finally gone beyond his chin.

'What?' we both asked Stephen.

'It makes you look a bit girly', he said. 'Malina?'

'Yes?' She called back from the kitchen.

'Have you the scissors in there? Jakey's hair needs a cut.'

She came into the living room very quietly with the orange scissors case in her hand. She looked at us there, frozen around Jakey. His face was so still and white I wondered whether he'd fainted.

'Please' I said, to no-one in particular.

Ash suddenly spoke, 'my hair's longer than his, should I not get one first?' He was still combing it out, and with the water weighing it down, it was down to his shoulder-blades. I shot him a look of thanks, he loved his hair, and he smiled back at me and shrugged.

Stephen eyed it, and grunted. 'It looks different on you.'

'Me too' I said, holding out a long white sheaf of it to Stephen.

He didn't even look at me. 'You're supposed to have long hair.'

Then he went to get towels, spread one on the floor and then dragged a dining chair over and put it onto it.

'Come on, we've not got long.'

We were all still standing there staring stupidly at Jakey and his eyes were fixed on mine.

'Come on,' Stephen repeated. And then, when nothing happened, he grabbed Jakey's wrist none too gently and led him to the chair.

'Sit down. It's only a bloody haircut, anyone would think you're being murdered!' He wrapped the other towel roughly around his shoulders and then stepped back.

Malina hovered horribly around him, hands shaking. A single tear slid down Jakey's face and he bowed his head.

'Jesus Christ!' Stephen exploded. 'What's with the dramatics? Stop being such a woman.'

He looked at Malina, who still hadn't got the scissors out of the case.

'Malina! Get on with it, we haven't got all day. People will be arriving soon and we'll have to Hoover the mess up afterwards.'

She slowly tipped the scissors onto her hand, and stroked her fingers through his hair. When she touched him, Jakey flinched and I did too. Stephen exhaled in pure frustration, and that shook her into action. She started at the back, and began combing and trimming so slowly that Stephen actually clapped his hands, surprising even him I think. She sped up, but made sure to leave the long bits at the front that had taken him so long to grow and that he loved to push back in a gesture identical to Ash. When Stephen was satisfied that she was doing a proper job, he started up the stairs to shower and dress. Even after he'd gone, Malina continued with her back stooped and not looking at any of us. I burned with hatred for her, but we all knew that she wasn't allowed to stop. I stood next to Ash and felt sick. It was such a small thing in the great scheme of things, but Jakey had so much less than me and Ash and he wasn't even allowed his own hair. We were all silent until she finished and then, when she gently took the towel from his shoulders, we all went to my room together. Fuck the cooking, she could Hoover up the mess she'd made.

Up there, I locked the door and Jakey curled into a ball on my bed. I laid down next to him, and listened to his quiet, hard sobs. Ash paced to the balcony and leaned out with his back to us.

'It's not too bad', I said. 'She's left the front bits, and feel it, the back is still longish, it's just less raggedy.'

He ignored me, and I didn't blame him. He looked like a choirboy.

When we went downstairs at seven, the living room was Hoovered and the kitchen was white and gleaming, with eight or nine dishes of food cling-filmed on the counters. A whole work-surface was covered in glasses and sliced lemons and limes. In the fridge there were jugs of Pimms and more bowls of salads and desserts. Stephen was muttering over the barbeque, and when he saw us, he told us to wait by the door for the first arrivals. He didn't even look at Jakey's hair. I poured us each a large G&T in juice glasses and we went and sat out on the front steps.

Ash rested his forearm on Jakey's right shoulder and I encircled Jakey's bony wrist with my finger and thumb.

The sky was thickening and the air smelled of the fields drying out. The heat had forced the village into silence, and so we could hear the guests arriving down the road in their twos and threes. I was never sure whether people came because they wanted to, or because they had to, but clearly no-one wanted to be first. They clotted together in a bottleneck at the end of the road, and so when they eventually filed down the path to where we were sitting they'd sorted themselves out into men and then women, like infants going into school. The air was so still that I could smell which wives kept their body lotion in the fridge and which didn't. Faced with this influx of people, we didn't really know what to do. We moved back off the warm steps, so that people could get past us into the house, and ended up leaning on the rickety blue table by the front door that held a collection of potted geraniums. Most of them smiled in our direction and said hi, but the wives mainly ignored me, and their husbands didn't make direct eye contact. After one clot had passed through into the house, Ash snorted.

I just shrugged. 'They won't have to worry about me much longer.'

We leaned there a little longer, waiting until the last guests had arrived and the sun had sunk below the school, and then we saw a familiar figure in a bright red shirt walking down our path, waving. Mr Tudor.

'Sir!' I said. I was so pleased to see him, but it was completely unexpected, he'd never been anywhere near our house before.

'Jazz! A good evening to you. What on earth are you wearing? You look like a daddy long-legs.'

I laughed, and pulled my dress further down my thighs.

'Boys.' he nodded to Ash and Jakey. Ash nodded back, and Jakey smiled shyly.

'What are you doing here?' I said.

'Me?' He gestured to himself in mock confusion. 'I'm here to enjoy a lovely evening with friends!' He was holding a litre bottle of brandy and a smaller one of angostura bitters. 'Jacob, if you find me some lemons I'll teach you to make a sour. How old are you these days?'

Jakey got up off the table. 'Fourteen sir.'

'Never mind. Ash, be a pal and show me to the bar.'

Jakey sat back down beside me and Ash stood up and led the way to the kitchen. Me and Jakey were left outside in the rapid twilight. Over the yard walls the fairy lights in the trees glittered behind the leaves, and someone had put a CD on of classical guitar music. No one voice could be picked out, but there was a gentle hubbub of conversation rising and falling. I almost wanted to be a part of it. I was pretty sure everyone was there, and we would have to go inside soon to mingle naturally. Jakey wasn't ready though, and I would stay with him until he felt able to stand up near Stephen. He finished up his G&T and waited for it to start working. Then, out of the darkness to the right of us, we heard a cackling laugh and footsteps coming from the scrub. All the other guests had come the road-side, so I was interested in who would come that way.

It was a woman and a man, and I heard him murmur a quick run of words, and then heard her say

'Stoppit, I'll wee!'

As they got closer to the pool of light the door cast onto the scrub, I saw her walking with one leg deliberately over the other and holding onto him for support. She was laughing so hard that it almost made me laugh too, and me and Jakey watched as they came closer.

'Stop it! We're here! Stop it now or I'm not going in with you.' I vaguely recognised the woman, with bright red curls and a flowery dress. She was plump and tall and very pretty, and I liked her immediately. Her husband was smiling as they approached the steps and as they looked up and saw us they made a small effort to straighten themselves. She pulled a dress strap back onto her shoulder, and he rubbed a hand over his mouth as if to wipe off his smile, but it didn't work. I smiled back at them. 'Hi.'

The woman came over and actually looked me in the eye.

'Jesamy is it? I'm Tina. Lovely to meet you. We're late aren't we? The bloody babysitter...never mind. And you're Jakey?'

As she was talking she leaned in and kissed me on the cheek, and then did the same to Jakey. She wasn't wearing any perfume and just smelled clean.

'We're from up the hill, he's the new social worker.' She nodded at the man next to her.

'Rob. Hi.' He said, stepping forwards and shaking Jakey's hand.

'Is everyone here? I brought pudding, so I hope no one has missed us yet.' She gestured with a tray wrapped in tinfoil, and Jakey snapped to and took it off her.

'Thanks love.' She followed him inside, and didn't stay behind to watch Rob shake my hand. He must have only been 5'6, a good four inches shorter than me, but very handsome in a healthy kind of way. He smiled and motioned that I should lead the way.

The house was hotter inside, with all the smells of half-warm plates of food and rancid body lotion, and I went straight through to the kitchen to get something cool to drink. Ash was there with Tina and Jakey, all laughing at something Mr. Tudor was saying. In fact, he had a small group around him smiling whilst he gestured about with his whole body. I listened in, and it was an old anecdote about when he tried to play Bohemian Rhapsody on the organ up at church. I laughed too, despite having heard it several times before, and had a feeling that he would be popular at this party.

Ash gave me a tall glass of brandy sour sweating with ice, and leaned on the counter next to me. Jakey leaned in on the other side of me. The kitchen clock read ten past eight. Mr. Tudor had got to acting out the bridge, and that was an exciting display in his right hand, heavy smashing with his left, and lots of pulling and kicking and stamping and general drama.

'Five hours left' Ash said quietly. 'And then that's it, the last one. We'd better split up in a minute.'

I nodded and Jakey did too, then we went our separate ways.

*Ash*

Out in the yard all the neighbours cluster round the table picking up plates and clucking about the food. Polite, always so polite, *you first, no I couldn't possibly, you've had your eye on that satay all night, and besides, I was going to ask Malina what she put in the couscous – it looks like spring onion so I'd better not risk it, onion gives me terrible heartburn.* All dipping in and out, spoiling the creamy tops of things, the perfect curls of the butter and all the peppers arranged in concentric circles on top of the spinach. Malina's wrists bent under greasy plates of steak and salmon. Flat-breads stacked high. Cheese with grill marks like it was painted on. *Sod the diet, that halloumi is too good to go to waste, or to Oscar, which is the same thing really!* Ouzo and pale lager from the west of the island make fools of the doctors and the teachers, two-thirds of the personnel on this patch. The last third, the men who work with Stephen, stand inward, their eyes on each other, and their pints are never drunk whilst at all times appearing to be. The soberest men at a barbeque are the ones with half-full glasses. Stephen's pint rests on the window-sill whilst he turns vegetable skewers over the flames and no-one would ever know from his flirtatious apron and pale shorts that his every thought is rigid and that he will never let go – if someone tried to take the tongs from him now his grip on them would be iron, he'd laugh it off and hand them over straight away, but it is hard to forget his initial impulse for iron, and that's nothing compared with his grip on himself, with his grip on you.

Every man on this patch is married to a woman. And every woman is married to a man. So you don't know how it comes up, but it does. Someone doesn't say a word like *poofter* or *faggot*, but something is said. These teachers and doctors and men with jobs no-one talks about, do not say these words. But somehow a word like that gets said. A snake it spreads so quickly, curving from chair to chair and finding no barriers. No one will stop the word before it reaches Jakey there, with only a side plate because all the big plates are being used, reaching over in his tight black shorts to tear off a slice of garlic bread. It doesn't get stopped in time because you're pouring a doctor some Pimms from the jug, and Jesamy is carrying a pile of plates back into the kitchen for Malina to wash up. It hits him straight in the chest, the tight black shorts suddenly too tight and you see him turning in on himself, still tearing the garlic bread as if nothing happened. And whilst he is



turning in on himself, Stephen moves to the table beside him with a platter of fat burgers, and says to no-one in particular *well, all I can say is that I'm very glad that none of my children are that way inclined. I'd hate them to fly in the face of what's normal and face all the persecution that comes along with it.* Jakey white now continues to move slowly around the table, a dab of potato salad here, a few cherry tomatoes, something else, another thing, he can't remember whether he even likes tzatziki. Stephen never looks at him, but still he is watching. At the back of the yard there is a bower of bougainvillea where the fairy-lanterns do not cast any light and here he sits with his plate of things he doesn't know anymore. You can't go straight to him, because everything is normal everything is fine, so you eat, and Jesamy eats, and you take your turns keeping the drinks topped up. You top yourself up too, good brown juice out of the jugs, and eat with your fingers a slice of the soft Bailey's chocolate cheesecake that's staining its own ghost on a cardboard disc in the kitchen. There's a raspberry jelly with coulis and clementine sorbet, a pavlova from the dentist's wife that always goes down so well, she'll never tell her recipe though, also pineapple-heavy fruit salad that makes all the food in your gut ferment instantly on contact with it. Jesamy drifts past with a bottle of whatever and you take it and pour four fingers into your glass and that's better.

Things are smudgy after this, there's a game of bullshit on the back veranda, someone lines up cans of coke on the yard wall and makes a slingshot. The cat gets hit by a pebble and yowls but it's no-one's cat, it's probably the cat from number 57 so it shouldn't be here. Mr Tudor getting louder and spinning stories and circles around him and Stephen getting tighter and tighter about it. The hangman isn't here but he's what's behind the flush on Mr Tudor's face, and the tendons standing out in Stephen's neck.

This is the middle class in the middle of the summer in the middle of the night. Glowing coals, the crust of burnt kebabs, mellow minds and loose words, arms that sweat around the backs of flagging children. Jakey has disappeared and you're not allowed to go find him yet. Then all at once you're in the kitchen and Stephen comes past to get more cans from the fridge. His apron, Kiss Me I'm Grillin', makes you burp a bit of fruit salad flavoured burger into the back of your throat and you say something that you can't remember. Something shit, and not clever enough to threaten him. And he fucking laughs.

*I don't know what you're talking about Ash, persecution is a very strong word.*

When you spit something else out he tells you *don't embarrass yourself, you've been drinking so I'll agree to let this drop now.*

Then worse, you say, *he's your son.*

He says it – *wouldn't trouble him to act a bit more like you though would it? Why don't you take him up to footie on Friday?*

Fists balling and he's moving away even now, ramrod back to his ramrod colleagues all in their circle of eyes, knowing that technically nothing at all even happened. So he's got you so the back screen-door gets punched right through, the mosquito-webbing burns your fingers and it's so inappropriate, who did that? It's so good but not as good as skin. You know that if you hit him you'd do it right. You'd make the first punch cause as much splitting and bleeding as possible, splintered bone against your knuckles, the hum of pain all down your right arm. And the second would be as quiet as the wind in the trees, just as gentle, just a swoop to the temple, just enough to close his fucking eyes without him ever knowing it.

*Jakey*

I'd forgotten to close the windows in my room and everything had the burnt salmon stink of the barbeque, but it was better than the mayonnaisy smell of the salads and the hundred-flower perfumes below. I sat on the floor with the carpet pressing tiny dots into my legs and listened to the hubbing of voices outside, occasionally the *crusshk* of a can opening or a laugh cutting through.

I looked at the walls, which were bare apart from a Simpsons poster that was four years old. I didn't spend much time in my room normally, it was just a small white square with clothes and my schoolbag. I slept in the aircon in Ash's room during the summer, and in winter sometimes Jesamy let me sleep at the end of her bed like a dog. Being alone was punishment, but one I somehow deserved. Slowly, slowly, the voices lowered, goodbyes were called out, and the yard door clacked to for the last time. The house switched quietly off around me. Just before one, Jesamy tapped on my door like a mouse and said round it to me 'are you coming into Ash's room, chick?'

I just shook my head and said without looking at her 'it's not too hot tonight'.

She came more into the room and held her hand out. I reached for her and she pulled me into a tight tight hug and swayed me gently like we were on a boat. She leaned her head down until we had our foreheads touching and said 'water off a duck's back, water off a duck's back', and I knew that Ash had told her what Stephen had said.

'None of this can matter my love, you've got to be a duck.'

And as powerfully as if we were sharing the same thought I suddenly saw dark oily feathers and a bead of water rolling off them. I saw more and more droplets, and they rolled off the same every time. But then I wondered how many droplets it would take to drown me.

'You'll float', she muttered, her lips against my cheek. I didn't think I'd said it out loud, but I just nodded and she let me go.

'If you get too hot just come in.'

I nodded again and she left.

I got onto my bed and pulled the sheet over my head. It smelled of fabric conditioner and it had probably been washed and changed two or three times without me having ever slept in it. I knew Ash and Jesamy said not to worry and think about it all the time, but I just couldn't imagine what would happen once they'd gone to uni and I was in the house without them. I knew that Malina would do her best for me, but against Stephen that wasn't worth much. Four years on my own, after being wrapped in Ash and Jesamy my whole entire life. They were my real parents, Ash the dad cooking and driving, and Jesamy the mum talking and holding my hand, and the pair of them fighting for me any time I needed it.

Without them I was going to be a new orphan trapped in a house with a father who hated me and a mother who was scared of everything which I think included me. Stephen had never done much to me before apart from ignore me, but sooner or later I was going to do something wrong and he was going to get me. I just didn't know how.

*Jesamy*

We woke up to the kind of late morning where the heat clamps a hand over your mouth. I was only wearing a bikini and Ash's Foo Fighters t-shirt as a dress, but still I was greased in sweat. I ate breakfast in the yard, across from Ash, next to Jakey. Stephen was at work and the whole house had sagged out of its tension. I looked at Malina in the corner of the garden watering the bougainvillea, and realised that if he wasn't protected, Jakey would end up doing the same thing. Folding himself so small that no-one would ever know he was there.

'You do realise that if you water it at this time the sun will burn the leaves and it'll kill it?' I said at her.

Malina looked over at me, then she shook her head at the plant as if in apology. She curled the hose up and went inside. There was something wrong with my skin, raw. I felt dangerous and undone.

Then I remembered a story a pilot had told, years ago, round the table at a dinner party. He had been dirt-biking one winter with his teenage daughter up in the hills above town. She'd had an accident and spilled off her bike down a ribbon of tarmac that had flayed the clothes and skin from half her body. He'd kicked himself off his own bike, leaving the engine running, and hoisted her into his arms whilst she fainted then screamed, fainted then screamed. He held her to him on his bike and rode the pair of them from the hills down to the salt-lake. The water was low and saturated and he'd waded in with her in his arms. Then, every particle of him cringing from it, dropped her into the salt. She woke up again in a whitewashed hospital and when they unwrapped the bandages there wasn't a single scar.

Saltwater. With the toast still in my mouth I pushed my chair back sharply and caught a glimpse of Jakey's surprised face as I wrenched open the yard-gate. The street was empty and soaked in light as I ran barefoot down to the 16B. The smell of Fisherman's Cove met me halfway down the road and I ran harder towards it. When the bay unrolled in front of me, I ran down the broken jetty and flung myself into the water, fully clothed under a wave and felt it, *welcome, welcome, welcome*. Blasted with blue, eyes open stinging, a blurred pebbled floor and nothing else but me. The limestone shelf flashed a white-y-turquoise under me and I swam across the bay in

the way that I did as a kid, underwater with frog-arms and butterfly-legs and the occasional scissor-kick. The t-shirt bagged out with the weight of the water. I liked the feel of it dragging me down, and I liked it billowing up around my face, making me feel naked despite the bikini underneath. I didn't come up to breathe much, waiting instead for the warning flecks of black in my eyes to force me to the surface. Out past the buoys I spotted a baby stingray, but could only see it through the skin of the water, every time I dived down it became a blurry grey plate skimming over the sand. I left it past the edge of the cove because I didn't want to follow it back to an anxious mother the size of a rug. Going shallower I rolled backwards slowly, holding my nose so that I could hang upside down and listen to the water swaying over the pebbles.

Later, half an hour or so, Ash came cutting over the water on an old wind-surf board from the sailing club, Jakey sitting small with his knees up behind him. They tied in to the buoy and drifted to where I was. I leaned my arms over the board, with my arm resting on Jakey's foot. I only had one summer left to save him.

*Jakey*

That day in the water was my favourite kind, where we were right out in the middle of the cove so that no-one could get us. Not the fishing boats that slipped out to sea at the mouth of their little harbour, not the cars bezzing along the coast road, not the people from our patch who spent the summer tanning at the sailing club, not the swimmers on the tourist beach on the other side of the chippy. Fisherman's was pebbled, so it was always empty when the other beaches were packed, and because it was so small, being out in the middle of it was cosy and safe. Tied in to the buoy, fifteen overarm strokes would get us to the rusty crucifix at the end of the fishing harbour, and twenty the other way would put us at the eastern slipway of the sailing club. And we had the big plastic board, which was our safe home when we needed something to hold onto. I loved that board, and we played games on it which we hadn't done since Jesamy and Ash got so much into proper surfing on the skinny boards. On this, two of us would hold a side steady, and then someone would try to do a handstand or a cartwheel on it. Ash managed a handstand, gripping the sides and slowly levering himself up over his hands like a monkey. Jesamy did a lopsided cartwheel and ended up coming off the side and nearly knocking Ash's head off as she collapsed into the water. I was less good at that than I was at Gladiators, which was where two of us battled it out to stand on the board as long as possible, whilst trying to knock the other person off. Because I was smaller than both of them, I could kind of crouch and keep my stance where their long arms and legs threw them off balance. My favourite was Fat Ducks, where we all straddled the board, and tried to stay on whilst Ash wobbled the board like mad from side to side. Because there was no-one to see us, we could all laugh and screech as much as we wanted, and Ash and Jesamy seemed years younger because they didn't have to be intimidating for once.

When we were all battered, Jesamy said to Ash, 'Do you have any money?'

He was lying on the tip of the board, with his legs dangling off into the water. He put a hand up to shade his eyes and looked back at her.

'Maybe, how much are you thinking?'

'Enough for sandwiches?'

'Hm,' he said, but looked in the zip pocket of his board shorts. All he came up with was a few fifty cents and three twenty cents, but it was enough to do two sandwiches. He handed it to Jesamy and said 'off you pop then.'

She just looked sadly at him with her hand outstretched until he sighed and took the money back. She smiled as he put it back in his pocket, then, when he'd zipped it back up, she gently pushed him off the board with her foot. When he spluttered dramatically back to the surface, she said 'grilled please, and a bottle of water if there's enough.'

'Can I have a grilled as well please?' I said, brave because of Jesamy taking charge. He grabbed the board whilst he blew water out of his nose and said 'oh right, so what am I supposed to do? Fuck myself?'

Jesamy smiled at him. 'If you want to.'

He just pushed himself off and started swimming to the sailing club. We sat up on the board and watched him as he came to the slipway. It was horrible on there, really slimy with a dark drop-off into seaweedy rocks. I didn't envy him. He seemed scared too, and swam as high as he could before putting his feet down, and even then he was kind of hobbling as if he was avoiding something. When he got to the top he climbed onto the rocks and shouted something out to us and gestured big 'come here' movements with both arms.

'What was that?' I said to Jesamy.

She was shading her eyes so she could catch it better.

'What?' She shouted back to him.

This time we both heard it, '...urchins.'

I did a big uncontrollable shudder when I heard that, and Jesamy got goosebumps all down her arm.

'Fucking disgusting' she said. 'We'll go pick him up when he's got the sandwiches.'

He disappeared into the shade of the club, and we both strapped masks and snorkels on and laid belly-down on the board, staring down into the blue world below. It was weird how little attention



we paid to the city of the sea when we were blundering about on the board, or treading water with our heads in the air. It was perfect down there, with things moving about like they were safe behind glass. On the seabed were hummocks of rock with thousand-strand grasses growing on them and waving slowly in the current. Glittering fish smaller than my fingernails flicked in and out, for food or their babies or protection I didn't know. Every now and again, a shoal of bigger silver fish would flash past, twitching when we moved our arms in the water. As long as you knew where to look, there was something going about its day. Hermit crabs making slow-fast progress across the sand. Skinny fish burrowing into the sand and darting out, then burrowing in again. Jesamy's arm, bluish under the water pointing out at the dark mouth of the cove, where a young swordfish edged into the light for a second and then disappeared.

My mask had clouded, so I dragged myself up back onto the board, pulled the mask off and spat on the lenses. By the time I'd finished rinsing it in the sea, I could see Ash coming out onto the sailing club rocks with a bag in his hand. I slithered into the water and untied the board from the buoy rope. Jesamy's face upside down watched me as I squirmed around trying not to touch the snailly things growing on the rope. She laughed around her snorkel mouthpiece, and then came back up to air.

She laid down on the board with her feet in the air, and I sat behind her knees as she paddled us over to the sailing club slipway. Her back was hard and smooth as her arms flashed in and out of the water. I started to get a weird squinching feeling as we pulled over the brown submerged rocks and we could start to see the urchins clustering all along the slipway. I couldn't figure out how Ash had actually managed to avoid them, because wherever the urchins hadn't colonised, the slipway was covered in slime. I shuddered again and Jesamy said 'stop it' without looking around, because she was trying to paddle as shallowly as possible without getting her hands jabbed.

Ash met us about half a foot deep, where the boats had scraped most of the urchins off the slipway. He chucked the warm pink plastic bag at me, then Jesamy sat back whilst he shuffled onto the board. This meant that all three of us were sitting with our legs up to avoid the spikes and slime, but it was worse than Fat Ducks, because we really really didn't want to go in and land on

top of those prickly fuckers. We managed to get ourselves out into deeper water by pushing off from the rocks, and it was such a relief to let our legs back down once we got out into the turquoise water.

We didn't tie into the buoy again, instead we just sat there in the middle of the bay, sharing one bottle of water and two big thick grilled sandwiches between us. We were a perfect team, Jesamy taking her tomatoes out, me taking out the pickles, and Ash snapping up whatever we didn't want. When we'd finished we folded the greaseproof paper and wrapped it in the bag, then stuffed it into the hole in the board that the sail pole should have slotted into.

The rest of the afternoon we took turns with the masks and lazed about on the board, filling the water bottle with sea water and pouring it over our burning skin. For a good hour Jesamy threw pebbles for me and Ash and we went diving after them, returning like dogs coming back to their owner with a ball. In the end dehydration drove us back to the sailing club and we stowed the board as the boats were coming in.

*Ash*

Salt-stung, coming home at sunset, all of you thirsty aching. You go to the fridge in the shed for a drink and she's in the yard-shower first. Jakey in the bathroom downstairs. You could shower upstairs but it's weak up there, warm and dribbling, and this one outside so strong it swamps the flags. Sit down with an ice-tea and watch her, waiting. Straddling the drain and breathing in that flat belly *uh-uh-uh eeshk* as water so warm turns icy. Gooseflesh flashing through the water. Turning to the side she's lifting arms, nipples biting through bikini, then faces the wall. Shampoo bubbling up and everywhere, her leaning in and out to sluice it, won't use her hands like she knows what you're playing. Bottoms billowing out with water trapped, slipping down to the top of her ass crack and something squirms in your stomach. Boner already so you're up before she's out, towel loosely held through the kitchen and stairs taken three at a time. Smell in the house like bolognaise and you're hungry starving, into the shower-room before anyone sees you.

The water pisses warm onto your chest, barely shifting the sand, and some soap quick, foamy stuff in a bottle. Grab your cock it's twitching making the veins in your hips stand out, and you rewind hard thirty seconds. She's still under the water, and slippery, and when you stand behind her she threads her arms back through yours so you're stuck tight together. Running fingers up and down her ribs, tits tight and tiny, skipping down to slivered hipbones and back up, rubbing rubbing. So cold so ripping your boardshorts down and pulling the string of her bikini bottom so it slides down to the drain still creamy with shampoo. Bite her neck and she's twisting round, on you, already hooking her legs up and are you staggering or carrying her? tripping backwards out of the shower and she's pushing you down onto the flagstones, you can feel them warm through the water. She's in you or the other way around, sudden like you've never felt it. And buck, she's eyes-closed, buck, and then she lifts up almost you're out of her and slams back down, rides you angry with one fist knuckled into your ribs and the other into your teeth-lips-teeth almost there she's biting her lip til bleeding and she leans forward, wet belly, squeezing you tighter and not breathing now until you're spasming into her. Spasming up the shower curtain alone, soap and cock in your hand. Shame in the back of your throat spit it out, tastes like lemon ice-tea.

You turn the shower-head onto the curtain and wait til the pearlscum washes out onto the floor. When you're dressed you go back downstairs, Malina putting a bowl of spaghetti onto the table in the yard. Jesamy's sitting on the hammock with Jakey, a towel round her hair. He's telling her *it was the biggest whale in the whole world with all this moss on his back*, and she's drinking tonic from the can the way she does, unopened, sucking through a hole pierced in the side. Laughing but she won't look at you, and even though your stomach is churning empty, you can't think about eating.

*Jakey*

After the shitty barbeque and me realising that when Ash and Jesamy left I was going to be completely alone, I'd noticed that Jesamy had started a new kind of summer camp. It was just us three, and it seemed like each day we did something different out of the house. She would kind of be smiling all the time, and there was a definite focus on doing stuff so fast and fun that we didn't really have time to think. To be fair, it was working. But then things got weird when I bashed my foot surfing.

That's a lie. I was actually only at the part where you run into the sea with the board under your arm and you look really cool. That lasted about ten seconds, then I smashed the side of my foot on a rock. I shouted the weakest swearing I've ever done, like 'crap, shag!' and flopped down into the shallows and started rocking and holding my foot. I almost cried, but it felt like I'd swallowed a burning blob the size of a human heart, so couldn't. Anyway, the point is that Ash was really, really pissed off with me. I got where he was coming from, the waves were here for the first time in months and we wouldn't be able to go later because it flattens out in about ten seconds, so this was kind of the only chance. But on the other hand I was literally dying. So Ash had to swim out to where my board had drifted when I'd dropped it, 'why the hell didn't you put your leash on before you came in?', but Jesamy said 'don't, I think he's hurt' (yeah, you think?) then put her shoulder under my arm and hobble-carried me back to the beach.

When we got back to the road we were figuring out what to do with the boards and bags, and me, because my foot was swelling up pufferfish-style and I think Ash felt bad for having a go. I couldn't walk, because it was so fat underneath. We'd got to the stage where Ash was going to carry the boards, and Jesamy was going to piggy-back me with one bag on my back, and one on her front. Then this dusty Mercedes came past and Mr. Tudor leaned out the window and shouted 'Jazz, are these lads hassling you?' and she yelled back 'it's alright sir, this one's injured anyway.' He got out then, wearing a t-shirt with *The Official Secrets* in white letters on the front. That's his band name that Stephen flipped a switch about a few months ago. He leaned down to look at my foot and told Ash and Jesamy that he'd take me home so they could get back in the sea. But he called it 'that horrible soup' and shivered. So they took my board and said thank you and left. I

quickly put my t-shirt on, and tried to get in the car on the passenger side, but that's where the steering wheel was, and Mr. Tudor laughed and said 'you're not the first to do that'.

The car was ace. There was a blue rope wrapped around the clutch, and when Mr. Tudor needed to change gear he told me to pull the rope to let the clutch out.

'I fixed it for free! Necessity is the mother of invention.'

The best bit was when every time we went round a corner the car beeped by itself, and it was a proper old-man blowing his nose honk. The first time was when we turned left onto the main road at the top of the woods and I laughed so he explained.

'It used to only do it when I went round corners in reverse, but it's upgraded to forwards now. Sometimes it does it when I brake suddenly, or when I switch it on in the morning. It gives me a laugh.'

When I asked him if it ever annoyed anyone he said, 'oh yes, but I learnt a long time ago not to care about that. And anyway, it's a safety feature! "Beep beep! Watch out goats! I'm coming round this corner!"'

When we came through the garrison gates and he showed his ID the guards saluted him so he saluted them back and said 'carry on lads' and they laughed at us when we beeped turning right.

The weird bit was when we went up the smooth curvy road up to the village, because he went quiet, and then said.

'You're a good kid, Jakey.'

I just said, 'yeah', more in a 'go on...' kind of way than arrogant agreeing to it, but I don't think it was a question anyway.

'Just. Keep an eye out on your mum would you?'

I was quite confused by that. I had no idea that they even knew each other. The garrison's a pretty small place, but she didn't really talk to anyone at all. I said 'do you know her?'

It was liked he got freaked out by me frowning and saying that. He blustered a bit and said 'Oh, I don't. But I know Ash and Jesamy are leaving this time and it might be hard on her. And you, presumably.' He looked over at me, and his face was quite red. 'I just think maybe you'll both need each other a bit more when they've gone, that's all.'

I still didn't really think he'd said what he wanted to say. He definitely knew more than me, and I got a bit worried then.

'Is there anything wrong with her?'

'No! No. There's nothing wrong. I only wanted you to check in with her because of the old empty nest coming up.'

I didn't get it. I was still going to be in the nest, wasn't I, and Jesamy and Ash didn't really have anything to do with her. I could barely even remember a time when they still called her mum.

'Ok.' I must have still looked confused or disbelieving, because he shook his head.

'Sorry, Jakey. I'm just trying to square things away before I leave.'

'You're leaving?' I said, quite upset because he was an awesome teacher. 'Why?'

'Oh, it's not confirmed yet. But I doubt I'll last out here much longer. Anyway, mum's the word on that one, kiddo. Although with a dad like yours, I'll bet you can keep a secret, can't you?'

'Yeah.' I looked out of the window and tried to figure out a way of finding out the truth, but we'd turned onto our street and with each passing house, I lost the thread of what he'd even said. We pulled into the drive soon after and he got out and opened my door. He gently pulled me and my bag out of the car and supported me as I rejigged my weight onto the good foot.

'Right. Here we are. Get some ice on that.'

I said yes and thank you and bye and he got back in the car and did a very loud three-point turn to get back onto the road. As he drove away he honked for real.

I limped down the path with my bag banging against my leg the whole way, and opened the yard gate. It sounded like no one was in, so I hopped to the fridge freezer in the shed to find some ice. There was none in there, but there was a packet of ice-pops so I got them out and collapsed

into a chair. Close to, my foot looked pretty ugly, swollen, with tiny cuts that I hadn't noticed before. Putting the ice-pops straight on the foot was far too cold, and actually made it hurt more, so I took my t-shirt off and tried to make a wrap thing. Then the packet of pops opened and they all went spilling out onto the flags making a stupid clatter, and suddenly I needed to cry. The pain was making me a bit queasish, and I needed some paracetamol but I didn't know where they were, and I just wanted a drink and a hug. Knowing that this was just the start, and that I'd have to get used to being this alone also didn't help, and before I knew it, the first fat drop had rolled down my face.

That's when I heard my name, 'Jakey?'

I raised my head and Malina was standing in the kitchen door looking at me with the look on her face that I always tried to ignore. It looked like love. When she saw how red and teary I was she walked quickly up to me and put a hand on my shoulder.

'What's wrong? Have you hurt yourself?'

I sniffed and said, 'my foot', showing her how puffed it was.

'God, is it broken? What happened?' and she went straight back into the kitchen and opened the freezer. She came back out with a bag of frozen peas and a tea-towel and a packet and some water, then folded the towel onto my foot and arranged the peas on top of it. She handed me two pills out of the packet and said 'it's ibuprofen, to take the swelling down. We need to find out if it's broken. And it'll help with the pain.'

As I took them, she drew another chair up to where I was sitting, and held her hands out. I didn't know what she wanted, then realised. My foot. I lifted it up, and she put it on her lap. It felt weird to have my heel cradled in the soft fabric of her skirt. I couldn't remember the last time I'd touched her. I tried to not put too much pressure on her knee because she was pretty thin and I didn't want to hurt her. The effort made my leg tremble a little bit and she smiled straight at me and said 'relax'.

'What happened?' she asked. Then as I started to tell her about how I'd run into the sea, she leaned down and picked up two ice-pops from the floor and bit the plastic tops off them. She handed me a red one which was my favourite and took the orange for herself. She didn't seem to



mind about all the other ones melting away on the warm flags. I looked straight at her as I told her about Mr Tudor driving me home but she just nodded seriously.

'Ok. It sounds like maybe you just bruised it. How is it feeling now?'

I thought about it for a second. 'Sore.'

She smiled. 'We'll see how you feel in ten minutes when we take the peas off.'

I felt briefly panicked that I would have to sit there for another ten minutes, but it was actually pretty calming, eating the ice-pop with a breeze blowing in from the beach, and the dull throbbing of my foot under the peas. I kept sneaking looks at her to see if she was falling apart or whatever Mr Tudor meant, but she just looked normal. If it weren't for her hair being the same matching brown as me and Ash, she'd look exactly like Jesamy, down to the last freckle. I felt a weird amount of like for her then, and hoped that sometimes we could hang out after Jesamy and Ash left. By thinking that I felt like I'd achieved what Mr Tudor wanted, without actually having to ask her what was going on in her life, because – a little pulse of anger here – what did she know about what was going on in my life? I got a bit scared then that the strong people were leaving me with this weaker one, and somehow I had to protect her? Altogether I was having way too many thoughts and feelings about her, which included a new tenderness that I wasn't used to, so I was glad when the ten minutes were up. She took the peas and the towel off and we looked down at the foot which had gone so numb that I'd forgotten it was part of my actual body. It had gone down with the cold.

'How does it feel?' she asked.

I wiggled my toes and it didn't hurt too much. 'Hm.' I said, and swung it down to the floor.

'Be gentle', she warned, and I slowly lowered it to the flags. That small amount of pressure didn't hurt too much, and to be honest it felt a lot better. She seemed to sense that and smiled.

'Let's keep icing it and make sure you rest and raise it today. I'll give you some more ibuprofen later and then we can see whether you want to go to get it x-rayed in the morning. I think you might be ok though. Maybe go and have a lie down now?'

'Thanks' I said, and she nodded, then she started picking up all the mess, my bag and the ice-pops and the packets and the bottle of water and stuff. I limp-hopped back into the house and up to bed.



*Jesamy*

The week after school ended, summer school began in the city. It was going to be two hours once a week, on a Wednesday. There was no way I'd have been allowed to get a bus there, in fact I'm not even sure there were any. Ash was going to drive me in and walk around Old Town whilst I was in class, but that morning someone knocked at my door at half past six. I was barely awake when I unbolted my door and saw Stephen standing there fully dressed in his khaki shorts and shirt, and his dust-coloured desert boots. I took an automatic step back and looked up at him.

'I've borrowed one of the boys to take you this afternoon,' he said. 'He'll be here at eleven.'

'What?' My voice came out thick and I coughed.

'He'll wait and bring you back after as well.' He turned away to the stairs.

'Wait.' I said. 'I thought Ash was taking me?'

He turned back with his hand on the bannister, 'he can go as well if he wants.'

'Will this be every week?' I said. It was just starting to sink in how weird it would look, me arriving with a guard every time.

'We'll see,' he replied, and then started down the stairs.

I swayed back to bed. A week out of school and I was already out of practise with mornings. My head drifted down onto the pillow, then through it, and then further into darkness. I woke at ten with my alarm, a hard stripe of sunlight printed across my eyes. After I showered and dressed, I went downstairs and poured out a large bowl of muesli with two spoons. I got a bottle of water, a banana and a peach and headed back upstairs, but to Ash's room, not mine. When I pushed his door open the room was cool, and Jakey was curled up on the futon on the floor, the sheet over his head and only his feet sticking out. Ash raised his head when I came in, and sat up to make room for me on the bed. He took the bottle of water off me and drank half of it before saying in a hoarse voice 'what've we got?'

I peeled the banana and broke off chunks of it into the bowl. 'Muesli' I said, and passed him a spoon.

'What time is it?'

'Ten-ish'

He nodded, and shovelled some muesli into his mouth as I picked the almond flakes from the bowl.

'We're not leaving for a bit are we?' he said.

'No. But. At the crack of dawn Stephen knocked to say that he'd got some squaddie to take me today.'

He frowned and chewed. 'That's weird isn't it? He seemed fine about it last week.'

I nodded. 'He'll have heard something. Wonder what it is?'

'God knows. Dunno why he's got to be so fucking cryptic about everything all the time. He could just say: some cell is going to blow up half the mountain today, or there's a flash sale on at IKEA.'

'What?' This was Jakey, peeping out from under his sheet. He blinked at me. 'What are you eating?'

I threw the peach at the futon and it landed softly on his pillow. 'This is for you.'

'Thanks' he said. 'Are you going to IKEA today? Can I come?'

Ash spoke through a mouthful of cereal, 'no IKEA today. But apparently I'm not capable of driving Jesamy for forty-five minutes without terrorists nabbing off with her.' Some milk had trickled out of his mouth onto his chest and he scraped it off with the spoon.

I laughed, but Ash didn't. 'I don't think that's quite it.'

'Either way. I'm coming with.'

'Fine by me.'

'And if he's not here at eleven on the dot we'll set off alone and tell Stephen he was late.'

I shrugged. 'OK.'

But like Stephen said, at ten to eleven a Jeep pulled up in our driveway and a lad wearing desert camo rang the doorbell. He was tall and had the bulky look of all of the soldiers. I wasn't

sure whether it was the uniform or the PT, but they all seemed about fifteen percent bigger than normal men. I let him in and was about to offer him a drink for the journey when Ash walked past us both out of the door and said 'let's get going then.' When we got out to the truck he didn't even give me the option of getting in the front, just swung himself up and let me get in the back.

Prick, I thought. But I wouldn't have known what to say to the soldier, and was happier on the hard backseat looking down on things from much higher up than I was used to. We drove up through the villages and left the garrison by the North gate. Out there it was just red fields until the farms petered out and the drylands came in bit by bit. The engine was too loud for me to hear what Ash and the squaddie were saying, so I sat back and watched the desert jolt past.

When we reached the city it was dusty and scored over with the first graffiti layer of summer. The shops were still open blasting music and frigid air out of the doorways, but there were less people on the streets than usual. The air smelled of smoke. Usually when we'd go to Old Town we'd park up at the mattress shop and walk in, but the soldier drove right up to the college building and parked on the pavement. I asked him to stay in the truck.

Ash got out and walked in with me. We were early. The lifts didn't work so we walked up the fire escape. There were piss-stains in the corners, litter, globs of saliva, a few spatters of blood. I felt nauseous from the heat and the smell by the time we got to the tenth floor and tried to buy some water from the vending machine, but it was empty. Ash offered to wait in the corridor for me, but I told him to go and get himself an iced coffee in town, and he left with what seemed like relief. I knocked on the door of the classroom, and when no-one answered, pushed it open. It was empty, so I went in and sat at a desk nearest the window. From there, there were views over the whole city, right up to the borderline and the country beyond. I watched the traffic looping around Old Town in hypnotic circles.

At midday, about fifteen people came in talking to each other and took seats without looking at me. The air was thick with sweat and perfume, a trace of marijuana, but no-one asked me to open the window. When the tutor came in the room, everyone stopped talking. His name was Theo.

He was about my height and handsome as a hawk. He had thick black hair almost as long as Ash's and had two dreads in the back, with beads on one and a feather in another. I wanted to be special to him somehow, and that made me angry. As soon as he began to talk, I swiftly realised that I was out of my depth. I had no idea what he was saying. The words were easy enough: sign, arbitrary, text, but underneath them there was a darkness which was my own ignorance of what they really meant. It felt like the other students had secrets they weren't sharing with me. Apart from that, they all knew each other and Theo, knew where they were and why. I was at least three years younger than everyone else, and had no idea why I'd thought I could keep up.

I spent the first hour in a welter of self-hatred. Next to the intellectual and beautiful women of that class, I was a child. At the break I left to go to the toilet and kept my head down and hurried out before Theo could look at me.

The second hour passed in the same way as the one before. We were supposed to read and discuss a piece of writing, but the author was someone I had never heard of before and whose name I didn't even know how to pronounce: *Derrida*. The writing was so dense that I couldn't read a paragraph without feeling panic rising, and at no moment did I understand what the point of the essay was, or what he was even trying to say. I sat as still as possible in my chair by the window, almost too desperate to notice that not everyone in the class had fully got to grips with this Derrida either. Part of my discomfort was knowing that this was supposed to be a taste of university for me, a few months before I went. And sitting there, in a classroom full of people I was frightened of, reading things I didn't understand, and discussing concepts so alien that there didn't seem to be a reason for them, I began to doubt that it was the right move for me.

Once or twice, whilst the students were discussing the essay, Theo's gaze would flicker over me, almost as if he were asking my opinion. My cheeks were already red and I retreated further behind my hair, getting hotter and hotter, and more frightened of him calling me out from behind my veil. Outside the window the sky murmured in dry-storm and it became increasingly hard to breathe.

I was trembling by the time I heard the grumble of feet in the corridor outside signalling the end of the class. When I got up, I slid off my chair to wipe away the streaks of sweat that I knew my thighs had left on the plastic.

I hurried out like I did before and, as I passed Theo at the front of the classroom, he looked at me again and I briefly forgot how to walk in a normal way. My legs were far too long for my feet to deal with and I felt like a flamingo trying to escape notice. As soon as I was in the corridor I took a deep breath of the urine-scented air and swore I'd never go back there. Or anywhere else. Once I got onto the garrison I was never leaving again. In the stinking hot stairwell I started walking down the ten flights of stairs feeling lighter with each step. Somewhere around level 8 I became aware of footsteps behind me, and hurried in case it was any of my classmates. The steps following me sped up too, and when I looked up, I saw some black converse catching up with me. My heart started to hammer, and I wasn't surprised when the converse belonged to someone in black jeans. Theo rounded the last bend and caught up with me. We walked down the next six levels together almost in silence, and my ridiculous flamingo legs came back. He wasn't sweating, although I was. Just before we stepped out into the white heat he gave me a yellow book, *Illuminations*. Inside the front cover was his number and he told me to ring it when I'd finished, so that I could give it back to him. I think he knew that it was going to be the last day for things like that.

I smelled cigarette smoke as soon as we got outside, and Ash was there leaning on the jeep, fag in hand, waiting, wanting nothing from me but myself. I felt a surge of homecoming. When I looked around, Theo waved at me and almost smiled.

'Who's that?' Ash said, stubbing his cigarette out on the ground.

'Just the teacher from the class.' I replied, hoping that my voice didn't betray the giddy feeling in my chest.

'Should he be hanging round you afterwards?'

I stared at him but he wouldn't meet my eye. 'Jesus, Ash. He was just giving me a book.'

He looked at it and nodded. 'Right. Well we'd better get back.'



The squaddie pinched his own cigarette out and threw it out of his window then drove us back through the one-way system to get to the motorway. As we got closer to the centre, the smell of smoke got stronger and stopped smelling so much like cigarettes and more like burning fuel. Ash said something to the soldier that I didn't hear, and he tightened his grip on the steering wheel. There were suddenly more people on the streets, and the traffic was backing up away from the main square in Old Town. Someone banged on the side of the jeep, and the people on the pavements were all wearing bandanas over their mouths with sunglasses hiding their eyes. I flinched away from them and said 'Ash', although I didn't know what he could do about it.

'Shit' the squaddie said, and looked over his shoulder.

When I saw his face I realised how young he was. He'd probably not seen action yet. The traffic had come to a standstill in all three lanes because of a makeshift barricade a few hundred metres in front of us made of boards and people holding banners. The crowd had flowed as fast as water down to the square, and pooled around the bottom of the white governmental buildings. Through the crowds I could see fire, but I couldn't see what was burning. The flames seemed to be coming directly from the asphalt.

The soldier had started trying to edge us out of the traffic, although I think the people in the cars ahead and behind had also had that idea, so vehicles were sticking out in all directions, and the air was filled with revs.

Slowly, in a 97-point turn, the soldier managed to mount the pavement and drive us off in the opposite direction as fast as was safe for the people on the streets. None of us could relax until we'd got onto the motorway, and even then, the huge queue of stationary cars on the opposite side waiting to get into the city made us realise how big this was.

The riots were on the garrison news that night – the first time a local event had made it onto the military channel – segmented between the war report and sport. I realised that it had become international news, because this would be broadcast on all the bases, both overseas territories and home. Me and Ash and Jakey sat in the living room and tried to get our heads around seeing the

city on the TV. It looked like a film. Things escalated from banners to molotov cocktails pretty quickly. The riot police responded with tear-gas at first, but by the end they'd brought out the water cannons. Two government buildings were completely gutted by fire, and around half of the rioters were arrested. Not long after, the military went in and took the university back after the occupation I hadn't been aware of, herding the squatters and students out at gunpoint. I knew there was no way I'd be allowed back, and my only feeling was of relief.

After the clip, Jakey climbed up onto the sofa between me and Ash.

'You alright, pup?' I said.

He shook his head.

I scruffed his hair like a dog. 'What's up?'

'Why would he let you go?'

'Huh?'

He pointed to the TV, where the football results were flashing onto the screen. 'Stephen.'

'Oh.' I looked over at Ash, who was biting his nails. Of course Stephen knew, and he sent me anyway. Ash spat a chip of nail out of his mouth and shrugged back at me.

'Hm.' I didn't know what to say. 'He gave me that squaddie. I was fine, chick.'

'But he knew.'

'Maybe. But there's probably more to it. If he did know he might not have been able to show it.'

We sat quietly for a while, the weather guy gestured to sunny spots and patches of rain on the screen, and Jakey leaned his head on my arm.

'It wasn't my building anyway.' I said. 'There was no trouble in there. And the riot was down in Old Town. He must have known I was safe.'

Jakey didn't respond. He was right not to. Stephen knew, but he wasn't omniscient. There was no way he could have guaranteed that I wouldn't have been caught up in the trouble, or Ash for that matter. Not for the first time I was reminded that Stephen's job came first every time. We were on

our own. Instead of scaring me, it just made me feel stronger, with Ash's foot on mine and Jakey curled up between us. Stephen could do his worst, but we were fine.

*Ash*

The next day you're back at Fisherman's like it never happened, and you know full well what nearly happened there in the city. You can barely believe that you let her go. Look at her over there jumping off the broken slipway with Jakey and she's laughing young enough to be his twin. Some days she tricks you into believing she's a woman, but today she's still a girl. You're swimming in slow semi-circles around the slipway, herding her close to shore, not letting her slip out into deeper water. Through the hair in your eyes you see the sunlight flash off the wet sides of her as she climbs back onto the slipway. Her hair is knotted on the top of her head and the sharp bones of her shoulders and spine are revealed in a way they're not normally. So thin that her spine is picked out as clearly as the skeleton of a fish and almost as fine. You imagine those bones see-through and snappable in the arms of a stranger. She'd never leave you, you know that. You're her brother, the other side of her, it'd be easier separating the front of a piece of paper from its back than separating her from you. But there's no harm in making sure.

She dives off the big rock at the end of the slipway, a concrete slab that pokes out when the water is low. See her as a white blur under the blue, then a wave comes slowly in and she's gone in the foam. No. She's back up again, further away than you thought. Dip under and power towards her, forcing the water in hard pulls past you. She's fast and sly but when you feel like this she may as well be trying to outrun a shark. When you reach her another wave comes in and smacks you in the side of the head. Blink away crackling suds and she's inches away staring at you. Her eyes are bloodshot and the eyelashes are clumped together and even though you know it's the salt, it looks like she's been crying.

*Don't go away, you say suddenly to her.*

*I haven't, she says back.*

*But don't. Because she didn't say that she wouldn't, just that she hadn't already.*

Instead of responding she leans back in the water and pulls herself into a slow backwards roll, so slow that her ribs and the hard plane of her belly appear and sink away from you, replaced by hip bone and thighs and knees and then feet. She leaves her feet in the air and does a handstand until

a wave comes in and sweeps her down. It's no response and doesn't put your mind to rest at all, but then you feel her hands on your shoulders and her wet face on the back of your neck.

*Taxi* she says.

You can do this game. You can have those long legs wrapped around your waist and the barely-weight of her on your back.

*Where to Madam?* you reply even though you'd go wherever she told you to, all the places where she hates to swim alone, like the urchin-bed or the crack in the rocks where the eels live, or the dark water where the sea-grass grows.

*Wherever.*

So fuck the fears, she's here isn't she? You swim-walk in the shallows so that the gravity of the shore holds her closer to you. Out in the deep, she drifts too lightly on you, almost not attached at all. Here, even though you sometimes stub your toes on the pebbled shelf, she's heavier and there's the definite weight of her forearm across your Adam's apple, and her knees pressed into your flanks. You're not even annoyed when Jakey swims over to see what you're doing and climbs onto Jesamy's back to join in, because with his sparrow weight on top of hers, he pushes her further onto you. All of you feels swollen and alive with this love, for the water and the sun on the waves and the wind in the palms and Jesamy always. You think you won't be able to move a step further without laughing aloud with it.

That night coming home from the beach you're still high from it all, but also from dehydration and not enough lunch. You want to eat all the foods that are more water than weight, and you're walking straight towards the bag of cucumbers you saw in the fridge earlier when you pass the yard doors and see Malina and Stephen outside having tea. Salad, yes, and steak, Jakey'll never eat that, you'll have to cook him something else. You're mulling that over, baked potato, tuna maybe? when Stephen says *Ash* and waves you over. Jesamy and Jakey go on to the kitchen, and you head out and present. There's enough salad left for the three of you so that's something. You eat a strip of the cucumber, perfect, and say to Malina *all right if we have the rest of this?*

She nods and Stephen says *five-a-side tomorrow?*

*Yeah. Like always. Quarter-finals.*

*Stand a chance?*

*Yep. Have a slice of red pepper, crisp and sweet.*

*Good good.*

Wonder what you're here for, then he says, *you'll be taking Jake up too then.*

*What? Forget about the salad for a second.*

*He'll have to sign up to senior sport in Year Ten, he might as well start playing now.*

*But he won't be able to in the quarters, the tournament has been on six weeks already!*

*I'm not saying he has to win the cup, but he could have a kick-about, or at least watch so he knows what he's going into next year.*

Fuck's sake. You're just glad you won't be here then trying to play and watch for those little shits to kick him in at the same time.

*Yeah alright.*

*Have a word with Ainscow about it. He might be able to swing something.*

*Yeah ok. Like bollocks you will.*

*Right. He looks at you and you look back. Good luck.*

*Cheers.*

He nods and starts cutting his steak. Dismissed. You pick up the salad bowl and walk slowly upstairs.

Jakey's in the shower and Jesamy's door is closed. Get into your room and then put the salad on the floor and sit next to it to think. They both come back into your room too soon.

*What? Jesamy says.*

*You've got to come up to footie tomorrow, you say to Jakey and see his face go blank. Just to watch.*

He seems relieved. *Oh. That's ok then.*

Look down at the salad and pick a small cherry tomato. *Do you guys want any of this?* you say.

*What else?* Jesamy says, and she's staring right at you.

Jakey goes still.

Can't look up so chew the edge of a mange tout and say around it, *it's a trial run for when you join the league next year.*

There's a dead silence. Jakey sits down on the futon and Jesamy joins him.

*They'll fucking kill me* he says in a small voice.

You can't help but agree.

*Jakey*

Jesamy's arm around my shoulders didn't work the way it usually did. Instead of warming me up, it suddenly felt too light to help me now. Her rib cage against mine was so narrow that it just reminded me of how fragile we both were. I realised then that I was never going to be a boy, a proper one like Ash. I was going to join the footie league, yeah, but all it would take was one missed pass or a fumbled kick, and then I'd be run down into the dirt worse than an animal and prove to Stephen that I'd never be what he wanted.

There was nothing to say. Jesamy was looking at the floor and Ash was picking at the salad, as if he wanted to get stuck in but didn't want to be rude to the atmosphere.

We sat there until Jesamy's arm felt clammy, and then she unstuck herself to go for a shower, 'but I'll be right back in' she said. Ash stayed with me and I sat watching him eat all the cucumber pieces out of the bowl. I was in such a deep state of panic that I was weirdly calm. It felt like being lost at sea, but instead of thrashing about trying not to drown, I had just breathed out and sunk under the waves.

Jesamy came in again in her Eeyore pyjamas smelling of apple shampoo, and then Ash got up for his shower. I had a guard with me at all times. It was like being a prisoner, which I guess I was. After Ash came back he closed the skylights and the balcony door and switched the aircon on. Then, even though it was only nine, Jesamy put the futon down and Ash got into his bed.

'One sec,' Jesamy said, and left the room.

I tucked the sheet around the futon, and then Jesamy came back in with her pillow and big cushions.

'Jump in', she said.

I got in, and she tucked her big cushions between me and the wardrobe, then got in and positioned her pillow so that we could both share it. It meant that we had to lie so close that our arms were overlapping, and that made me feel swaddled and small.

It was dark by then, and the three of us laid quietly with the slow breathing of the aircon overhead. I knew I wouldn't sleep, but in the black room I concentrated on being very, very still. I



challenged myself to not make a single movement to disturb Jesamy and was rewarded when she sighed and her arm went slack against mine as she fell asleep. Later I heard Malina and Stephen come up to bed, then the silence of the night set in.

*Jesamy*

By the time we set off for the pitches the next morning, I thought Jakey would faint. He hadn't eaten any dinner the night before, neither had I really, but he hadn't had any breakfast either. He was quiet on the walk up to the top of camp, and kept lagging behind, even though we were walking slowly. Ash and I had decided that I would come to watch too, and from there I was supposed to figure out a plan. Maybe talk to Rob, our neighbour who was the garrison social worker and ran the junior league. He seemed like a good guy, but I doubted he'd be able to teach Jakey to kick a ball before the vultures descended. All I wanted was to get Jakey through the next four years alive, and Stephen had just made my job a whole lot harder. All I could hope for was that he'd be posted somewhere else soon, but it's not like I was in charge of that.

Ash split off from us when we got to the video rental place, and started jogging up to the pitches.

I turned to find Jakey metres behind me.

'Come on, chickpea,' I said. 'We'll find somewhere to sit and watch.'

He nodded and we skirted the pitches, avoiding the boys that were clustering along the fences. A few of them jostled each other as we passed, but all they did was laugh and say stuff just below our hearing. Jakey ignored them and sped up to keep pace with me. I was heading to the welfare centre just beyond the furthest pitch. It had an upper balcony running the length of the building, and from there we'd be able to see everything from a safe remove. We got some cans of berry ice-tea from the vending machine, then climbed up to the balcony and settled ourselves with legs swinging over the sides. The marble tiles were smooth and cool against my thighs.

I scanned the area: thirty or forty boys, almost the entire male population of the school, all running up and down in yellow and red bibs. The pitches were old terracotta tennis courts which they'd modified to contain ten angry boys and one ball, but they were too small for warm-ups, which meant that the boys were dispersed around the scrub and harder to keep an eye on.

There were two other men apart from Rob. Mr. Ainscow the P.E teacher bawling at the seniors, and a man with him who I didn't recognise and was probably a dad. They were nearly identical,

muscular, thick-necked, tattooed, buzz-cuts. Neither of them would be any use. I didn't like the idea of talking to a neighbour about our situation, but it'd have to be Rob.

Eventually, the football started. It was so fucking boring. I didn't understand why any of this running and sweating and shouting was rewarded, when being kind and clever wasn't. Then I gave up worrying about that. I was leaving, and Jakey would eventually grow up, and this would never change. Instead I unfocused my gaze and watched the patterns of bodies in the cages below, a chaos of movement dictated by a ball. It was like watching traffic on a roundabout, or nesting insects, or pedestrians in a city centre. I was strangely lulled by it. The morning was heating up, but under the shade and catching a high breeze we were ok. It was a beautiful day, clearer than it usually was in summer, with the very faint sound of gunshots from the ranges. The only thing that was bothering me was that I needed a wee. I reckoned that we had at least another hour left before Rob finished, and there was no way that I could wait.

I shifted about a bit and Jakey looked at me.

'You ok?'

'Yeah, but I need a tiddle.'

'There'll be some toilets inside, if the centre is open.'

'Will you be alright, chicken?' I said. 'Do you want to come too?'

He smiled and said 'I'll be fine.'

'Sure?'

'Yeah.' He gestured to the boys caged up below.

I looked. Some of the boys were loose, watching the games after theirs had finished. But they were at the far court and would be heading home that way.

'Ok then.' I said. 'I'll be quick.'

The doors that ran along the upper balcony were all locked, so I headed down the stairs again and walked along the lower level to the entrance. As I saw Jakey's feet dangling above me, I stepped out into the storm drain and tried to jump up and pinch his toes, but they were too high for me to

reach. He leaned his face over the railings and smiled at me, his face round and cute from that perspective.

Round the back of the building I found a fire door propped open next to the offices. The toilets on that corridor were locked and I was starting to get desperate. I backed up, and ran down another corridor to the playgroup bit and finally found the disabled toilets. As I weed I put my hand on the cool sink and felt that feeling that maybe mothers have: anxious for their baby, but happy to be alone.

Walking back out of the building the warmth of the morning hit me, and I could smell salt on the air. Halloumi sandwiches down at the sailing club, I decided. After I'd spoken to Rob we'd go straight down there and just swim in our clothes if we had to. It cheered me up, and I jogged back to Jakey. Turning the corner of the centre, I looked up to see a gang of boys on the balcony where we had been sitting. I froze. As I watched, a slender figure squeezed through the railing of the balcony. He stood on the edge, holding the slippery rail hard, then got onto his knees, his back to the drop. Slowly he lowered one flip-flopped foot over the edge, then with a sickening lurch his other leg followed. Somehow he still had hold of the rail, but the marble edge was pressing so tightly against his chest that he had to let go. A gulp of berry-flavoured bile filled my mouth as one hand and then the other grabbed at the marble tile. He knocked his chin hard against the edge as his body swung backwards out over the drop. His legs kicked wildly at the air as he tried to grip the marble with his fingers.

When I tried to run towards him my body was rubberized, boneless. He stayed up there a seemingly impossible amount of time, hands pressed flat to the tiles. The boys moved in closer to him then and soon after he was falling, arms and legs swimming against gravity. As he fell, so did I. My knee and elbow hit the floor, hard, and this solidified me. I shouted 'Jakey!' then staggered up and hurtled down the steps to the lower floor. As they saw me coming, the kids on the balcony above scattered. My heart was pounding so quickly that I thought I'd faint before I reached him, but I got down to the storm drain where he was lying quiet and crumpled. I bent down and he looked up at me, sweating, but tearless. There were gobs of spit around and on him like bird-shit.

'Are you ok,' I said, 'did you bang your head?'

He shook it.

I felt his ankles, but they were straight and bony as always. 'Can you stand up?'

I took his left hand to help him, but almost immediately he winced and pulled away from me. We looked at his hand, and two fingers were crooking weirdly away from the rest.

'Did you land on them?' I said.

He shook his head again and muttered something I couldn't hear.

'What?'

It came out as a whisper. 'Stamped them.'

I stared at him. 'They fucking *stamped* on them?'

Jakey wouldn't meet my eye, 'I was hanging too long.'

'Right.' I said. And that's all I could say without bursting into furious tears. I half-dragged, half-carried him to the first court where the seniors were warming down, and shouted 'Ash' through the fence.

He looked up from the tangle of limbs he was in and ran over to us. 'What happened?'

'We need to go,' I said.

He nodded and ran out the door in the fence, then grabbed his bag and joined us.

'Are you ok? What's going on?'

'Jakey.' I said, then started crying.

Ash immediately put his arm around me, and led us both away from the boys who were starting to look in our direction. Ainscow jogged out of the court towards us, surprised and a bit pissed off.

'Ash, what's up?'

I turned on him and thrust Jakey's left hand towards him. 'They broke his fucking fingers.' I said.

'Your boys. I went to the toilet and when I got back they'd pushed him off the balcony.'

'Jesus.' Ainscow looked at us, then back at the courts. 'Right. I'll get Daz to take over and I'll get you guys to the med-station.' And with that he ran back to the courts.

Ainscow's car was small and the aircon didn't work. When he turned the engine on, Eminem came blaring out of the CD player, but he switched it off immediately. Jakey sat in the front, and Ainscow kind of reached over and patted his shoulder.

'You'll be fine, bud,' he said. 'We'll sort you out in no time.'

When Jakey didn't respond, he drove in silence.

It wasn't the injury itself that worried me. It was no worse than any of the other stuff they'd done to Jakey when me and Ash weren't there. This was the first time they'd broken a bone, but over the years they'd ripped his hair out, burnt him with lighters, held him under the water at the pool, tripped him down the stairs, swung a bag into his face and knocked a tooth out, and made him play knuckles till the skin was split open. That's to say nothing of the comments and the laughter and the looks and the things drawn on his workbooks. But this was under our noses. Ash was only metres away, 6ft 3 of muscle, and they'd done it anyway. Obviously our imminent departure from the island had spurred them on, to show us who'd come out on top of the takeover.

Ainscow got Jakey seen quickly, and at some point it appeared he'd rung Malina, because she was in the corridor after the doctor had splinted Jakey's fingers. Ainscow must have given Malina some official account, because when we joined them, apparently the boys who had done it hadn't been playing football that day. Malina just stared up at Ainscow with a dumb cow look on her face, and although I protested, and Ash backed me up, and Jakey held up his splinted fingers, nothing happened. Ainscow asked if Jakey could name any of the boys who had done it, and he shook his head. So that was that.

He couldn't name anyone, but I could.

I'd seen one of the kids, because I'd had my eye on him throughout the year. Marcus Miller. Even though he rarely got his hands dirty, he was somehow always involved in what happened to Jakey, and I suspected that he was the engineer behind some of the worst offences. He was in Jakey's class but older than him, a year behind in school, and that made me cold with determination. I only wanted three things for Marcus. He was going to fall from a height. He was going to break his

fingers. And he was going to be so scared that his life afterwards would look very different to how it did before.

*Jakey*

On Saturday morning everyone apart from me and Jesamy were pretending nothing had happened up at the football courts. Stephen basically didn't say anything about the splint on my fingers, and that was fine. But Ash and Malina wouldn't even look at me. Ash was furious that they'd done it in front of him, like he didn't matter anymore. And Malina, who knows? All of the understanding that had gone between us when she had my foot on her lap had disappeared. It looked like she'd given up on me, and felt that way too. Maybe I was too much trouble for her.

So I stuck close to Jesamy. When I went into her room in the morning, woozy off pain and codeine, she held her arms out to me from the bed, and under her sheets I finally cried. She put her hand in my hair and held it tightly and didn't say anything. We stayed there, me crying and her breathing, until the doorbell rang downstairs. No one ever rang the doorbell, because in summer all the doors in every house on the garrison stayed wide open to get the breeze through. It was either someone new, or someone official, and either was interesting enough to get out of bed and go see.

It turned out to be both. Rob from up the hill was in the yard with Stephen when me and Jesamy went downstairs. Ash met us in the hallway topless and with a can of iced-coffee. He offered it to Jesamy and she had a mouthful.

'What's going on?' he said.

'No idea,' she said, 'but I wanna know where the fuck he was yesterday.'

Ash nodded. 'I know.'

Jesamy gave me a gentle push and said 'come on' and we headed to the shoe cupboard by the front door where we'd get a better shot at listening in. We pretended to look for our flips-flops, as if we were heading out, even though me and Jesamy were only in pyjamas. Rob spotted us immediately and said 'hey guys' and waved us over. We went to the yard, and when he smiled at us and said 'how's it going?' Jesamy just narrowed her eyes at him and Ash nodded. I was the only one who said hi. He seemed to sense that we weren't in the mood for chit-chatting, so he launched in.

'So I've been talking to your dad about yesterday.'



I flicked a glance to Stephen, but he was just standing there as blank as always.

‘We’ve decided that Jakey’s probably not well-suited to the football team.’

Next to me Jesamy snorted. ‘This is his fault now?’

Stephen cleared his throat, quietly, and she shut up.

‘Not at all’ Rob looked at me. ‘To rephrase, it seems that the environment isn’t right for you, Jakey, and that there might be an alternative for your senior sport. Of course, senior sports are not mandatory’ and here he glanced at Stephen, ‘but most students benefit from the camaraderie of a team.’

Jesamy discreetly rolled her eyes and Ash who was biting his nails smiled at her. In PE she point-blank refused to do anything other than stand there when it was anything that involved teams, but she won everything going in athletics and the swimming galas, so she got away with it.

Rob continued, ‘I’m implementing a wider initiative this year, because it seemed like football and netball were getting a bit old really. So we’re putting a basketball league on in September. I noticed you’ve got a hoop outside, do you play already?’

I nodded. In truth, me and Jesamy mainly used it for a juggling game that we’d made up called giggleball, but it didn’t seem like the right time to admit that.

‘Excellent! It’s settled then. It’ll be a mixed group, boys and girls, and I think we’ll be getting a big turnout. Should be a good thing to get involved with.’

‘Sorry?’ Stephen looked briefly angry, then got his face under control again.

‘Hm?’ Rob looked at him.

‘Mixed? Girls and boys on teams together?’

‘Yes. I was unpleasantly surprised when I arrived here at how backward the garrison is, and in more ways than one.’

Me and Jesamy and Ash were silent.

‘Well.’ Stephen said. ‘A matter of opinion I’m sure.’

Rob smiled. 'I don't have opinions. In this job you have to stay objective, you'll understand of course.'

Stephen nodded stiffly.

'So. Jakey.' Rob put a gentle hand on my shoulder. 'Make sure you get plenty of rest over the summer and get that hand healed up. You'll be a shoo-in for the team if you keep growing at this rate too!'

When he said that, I straightened my back and stood tall for the first time ever around Stephen.

'I'll let you get back to your papers, Stephen.' Rob said, and clapped my shoulder as he walked past. Before he even closed the door, me and Jesamy and Ash slipped back into the house. None of us wanted to be around Stephen in the massive silence Rob had left behind. And I didn't want him to see the smile on my face that said I'd been saved.

*Jesamy*

I waited to talk to Ash until Malina and Stephen went up to the Mess for dinner and it was just us three in the house. Jakey was lolling on the sofa listening to Eva Cassidy, in that dreamy state she put him in. Ash was in the kitchen surrounded by vegetables and knives. I pulled the door to, and hopped up onto the countertop next to a board of chopped carrots.

'Hey. Watch my carrots.'

I pushed the pile slightly away from me, and popped a slice in my mouth. 'They're fine.'

'Hm.' He scraped them into a pan of boiling water.

'What are we making?'

'*I'm* making a lasagne.'

'Nice.'

I watched him tip finely sliced leeks and onions into a frying pan and flick them to cover them in oil.

'Right. Either shift your ass or chop this for me.' I took the cauliflower and knife he was holding out and sighed. I hated cooking. 'How small?'

'Bite-sized.'

Slowly I started ripping chunks off with my hands. Ash eyed my technique but didn't say anything, and turned to tip a tin of tomatoes in with the onions and leeks. I watched his back as he stirred them.

'Ash?'

'Mmhm? Just chuck the colli in with the carrots.' He reached over my legs for the basil and tore some leaves off.

I put the heads of cauliflower into the water and put the lid back on the pan.

'I'm worried.'

He stopped and leaned against my knees to look at me. My kneecaps pressed gently into his chest just under his ribs. He was so warm. 'What about?'

That close, I could see the chip of blue in the hazel of his left pupil. It was exactly the same colour as my eyes.

'Jakey' I said quietly, so that he wouldn't hear me from the living room.

Ash turned away again, to chop a square of butter into a saucepan. He added a spoonful of flour and started stirring it. 'Yesterday.'

'Yeah.'

Without him leaning on them, my knees felt cold and I wished he'd lean back on them.

'Looks like Rob's sorted the basketball though.' Ash said, pouring milk into the pan and whisking the sauce together.

'It's not enough. Just because he'll not be at football doesn't mean he won't be at school. Or here, for that matter. If they want him, they'll get him wherever. You saw what they did-'

'-all right.' Irritated. 'I know. I was there too.'

'That's exactly my point. If they did that now, in front of us, what will they do to him once we've gone?'

'It's not like we can take him to uni with us though is it?' He added handfuls of grated cheese to the sauce and stirred.

I shuddered away from the thought of uni. 'No, but we can make sure we give him one last good summer at least.'

'So we've got to take him on the whole Tour of Last?'

I sighed. We had planned to spend our last summer on the island revisiting all the places that had mattered to us. It had been the longest we'd lived anywhere, and, even though we'd tried not to, we'd let the island matter to us.

'I think so. Maybe we should make it his Tour of Last instead? The last summer with us, before he's ... on his own?'

Ash tipped the pan of boiling vegetables into a strainer over the sink. His back was to me again. He stirred the vegetables into the tomato sauce and seasoned it. 'Ok.'

I was surprised that he'd just accepted it. 'Really? You don't mind if he comes along?'

'No. What do you take me for? He's my brother too.'

I'd actually forgotten that. Jakey felt like my child somehow, my responsibility. Although Ash fought Jakey's battles for him, I'd always just thought that it was because he liked fighting.

'Thanks.'

'What for?' He turned to smile at me. 'Hey, don't eat that! It's not washed yet!'

I'd taken a big handful of spinach from a bowl on the counter and started eating it. I could immediately feel the grit still on it. I shuddered and stuck my tongue out at Ash with the bolus of half-chewed leaf on it. He reached in and scraped it off my tongue. He pulled a face.

'Mucky pup.'

He threw it in the sink and got me a glass of water. I swilled and then spat back in the cup and handed it to him.

He stared at me. 'Are you fucking kidding me?' He tossed the water into the sink and washed his hands.

I smiled. 'I'm glad I won't be leaving you behind as well.'

He dipped his face behind his hair but not before I caught his smile. He tasted a spoonful of the tomato sauce, then added more salt, a squeeze of lemon, and a blob of honey.

'Hm. Taste this.' He held a spoonful of it out to me, with his hand underneath to catch the drips. I sipped the sauce and nodded. 'Lovely.'

'Shift off now, I'm going to layer this up.'

I slid off the counter, and leaned against the door.

'So, what do you reckon we should do about those kids?'

Ash opened the oven door and reached in with a tea-towelled hand. 'I dunno. But they've taken the piss and I don't really want to let it go at this.' He put a baking tray down onto the counter. It was

full of sliced roasted aubergines and courgettes, with cherry tomatoes and sprigs of rosemary and whole cloves of garlic scattered about.

'That looks amazing' I said, and reached in to take a tomato. He slapped my hand with the tea-towel without even looking at me.

I bit a hangnail instead, and said 'I reckon we need to send a message that'll outlast us, so they don't think they can move in on him again.'

'Yeah?' He put a layer of aubergine down on the bottom of a square glass dish, spooned some vegetable tomato mixture on, then poured the cheese sauce on top of that. 'What like?'

'I don't know, I'll need to think about it. It might not be that nice.'

He repeated the steps with a layer of courgette.

'That's fine, it doesn't have to be nice.'

As he was pouring the cheese sauce, 'Autumn Leaves' came through the door, and Jakey drifted in.

'Something smells good. What are we making?'

'I am making lasagne.' Ash replied.

I smiled at Jakey. 'He's pretty adamant about that.'

'When's it ready?'

Ash poured cheese sauce on the top layer, and then sprinkled some cheddar on top.

'Once this is in...' he opened the oven door and slid the dish in. '...there.' He slammed the oven door. 'We'll be about half an hour. Let's go outside because I'm sweating my tits off in here.'

He wiped his face with the tea-towel and we headed out into the yard. Ash and Jakey got onto the hammock, and I went to the fridge in the shed to get some drinks.

'Budge up', I said, and squeezed in between them. I handed an ice-tea to Jakey, and then held one can of tonic water against Ash's forehead and another on his neck. He shivered away from me, took the cans and pressed them against my back under my t-shirt.

'Fuuucking hell. Stoppit.' I said.

He smiled and pierced the side of the can with his knife in a tiny hole the way I liked to drink it. He handed it to me.

'Thanks' I said.

I laid back and thanked God that he'd always be there to do that for me. Jakey swung us backwards and I got a head-swoop from seeing the sky suddenly appear behind the house walls.

'So what are we gonna do tomorrow?' Jakey said.

'What do you want to do?' Ash replied.

I was so happy that Ash was on board with everything that I leaned my head into his shoulder and sighed. As long as I had him, then I would be ok, and Jakey would be ok, and nothing would hurt us. Maybe this was what invincibility was, just knowing that you were always going to be fine.

'I dunno. Maybe go for a bike ride up to HQ? We haven't done that in ages!'

Jakey sat up in his excitement, and this jostled me and Ash even closer. Our arms were pressed so tightly together that I could feel his pulse in my wrist.

'What about your fingers, chicken?' I said.

'I can ride one-handed!'

'Hm.' I said. 'All right. As long as you're sure it'll be ok, bubs?'

Jakey laid back down happily. 'I'll be fine!'

I closed my eyes and felt the ground slip away from my feet as Ash swayed us slowly back and forth.

*Ash*

The house washing by, oven humming at the lasagne and nothing else moving apart from the plants in the courtyard. All three lulled almost to sleep with the slow sway of the sky overhead and gentle hunger. Shift slightly so that a quarter of your eye is just her, there's more you want to say to her but Jakey's here. There's a plant waving in shadows over her and you look at the way it ripples her skin, a zebra or the roof of a mouth in ridges black on white. You're staring at the inside of her arm where it meets yours, at the shadows first but then at the skin. So white it hurts to look at. Veins blueblack at the crease of her elbow. Thickest branching off into rivers becks streams, tributaries to the knots at her wrist, you pick her arm up and she lets you. You can see the pulsing there all over, at her wristbone and pads of her palm. The veins twirl up blue and green under her lifelines and all the others, fork up her fingers and you lose them at the nails. You can't see them anymore, but press down hard once on her thumbnail and the whole thing flushes with blood. You look up at her face and maybe it's just from shifting focus but the world swings with you. You can barely see her for the veins up her neck creeping along to her mouth and nose.

*I can see your veins* you murmur at her.

Yes she says back without opening her eyes.

No, you're a map of veins, shouldn't be open like that, but you can't think how to say it so don't.

*You don't have enough skin for all those veins.*

She sounds half-asleep dreamy. *No.*

*I'd give you some of mine if I could,* and you look at your own arms closed to the world, brown and opaque and everything inside. You'll be her skin if she needs it.

*Thank you.*

*I mean it.* And you do. Tell her like that that you love her.



*Jesamy*

The next day, like I'd promised Jakey, we went biking. Jakey's bike was third-hand and battered, both tires doughy to the touch, so I gave him mine. I'd backy with Ash. We half-cycled, half-walked up to the top of camp, and started underneath the bridge that crossed the scar. Sweating, we stopped for a moment next to a concrete pier thicker than a rosewood and looked down. It all fell away below us, the pines hugging the sides of the scar, the rocks held together with roots bursting through the limestone. The path jagged through it with no regard for thorn bush or grasses. Sometimes the path crumbled out where there'd been rockfall.

'Ok, guys,' I said, 'Three, two, one...'

On my bike, Jakey tippy-toed onto the pedals, and I clung to Ash on the seat of his bike as he pumped us both toward the hill. We started slowly with my added weight, but soon he passed Jakey, and we dropped down over the lip of the slope. From there we swiftly picked up speed and I couldn't breathe. I closed my eyes and felt things dapple past me, carob, pine, mimosa. When I opened them I looked straight up into the sky and saw the blue jerk away from me, black birds cutting through it too high to know their names. It hurt my thighs to hold my legs up with nothing to rest my feet on, but the feeling of holding Ash tight round his waist was worth it. Sometimes he stopped pedalling and let me crook my knees into the backs of his. Leaned forward into him, we were closer there than at any other time and he let me because he knew it too. He was warm, and smelled of washing powder with his basil-sharp sweat underneath. If I'd licked the brown skin where his t-shirt had pulled from his neck it would've tasted like me. I didn't.

We rattled down faster and faster, covering half an hour of slogging in no time, zig-zagging to avoid rockfall and carving around berms. I had to lean back when Ash started pounding the pedals to pull us through the gravel firebreak outside the house. When we finally stopped, my legs were buzzing so much I had to hold onto him to get off the seat. He turned around so I could see his face again, and somehow I'd missed him. He smiled and I realised how unsafe we really were. We waited for a few seconds for Jakey to pull up next to us. He was red and panting and in love with being with us. I wanted to give him as much as I could before we had to leave.

'Shall we go again?' I said.



*Jesamy*

It took a week to read Theo's book. A long, drowsy week of swinging in the hammock with an ice-pop and a notebook and *Illuminations*. And even then I couldn't read all of it. I just flipped to the chapters that were the most dog-eared, and were filled with Theo's cramped, illegible handwriting. That way I felt closer to him, reading this stuff that meant so much to him. I imagined him sitting on a mattress on the floor, candles lit, photos and posters blue-tacked to the walls. There would be a cigarette in his mouth trailing smoke into his eyes. Maybe some records on the floor although I had no idea if record players existed anymore. He'd be reading *Illuminations* and scribbling in the margins and coming up with ideas that he'd think about when no-one else was around. I didn't know where I'd ripped this scene from, but it felt familiar and also like no-one lived like that.

My favourite chapter was called 'The Storyteller', which, even though it was complicated, and about a Russian writer I'd never heard of before, was still friendlier than whatever bullshit Derrida was selling. I made notes. Well, mainly I just copied bits that seemed beautiful to me, without much to say about them. I hoped that when I gave it back I'd be able to just quote something about boredom being the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience and sound clever and like I knew what I was talking about.

When it got to the stage that reading it more wasn't going to help me out if he asked me any questions, I rang him. Ash was in the shower, Jakey reading in the aircon, so there was no-one around to watch me stammer and blush down the phone in the hallway. I did that stupid girl thing of dialling his number and then hanging up before it connected. I did that for a good minute or so, then the fear of him seeing ten missed calls from me overcame the fear of talking to him, and I let it connect. As it rang out, I had to sink to the hall-rug so that I didn't pass out from hyperventilation and my heart pounding so hard. Playing with the tassels on the rug I thought what a fucking cliché I was, but even that thought didn't help me feel better. When he finally picked up he was curt against a background of shouting and banging. But when I introduced myself and mentioned *Illuminations* his voice changed slightly.

'You finished with it then?'

'Kind of.' I'd decided to be honest-ish. 'Do you want me to bring it back to you?'

I hadn't quite thought about how I would get back to the city to give it to him, but I was in a fuck-it kind of mood. I really did quite want to see him again.

'Do you know Half Moon?'

'Yeah, I live like half an hour drive from there!'

That was good, I could walk there if push came to shove.

'Can you get there or I could meet you on the strip?'

'Oh my God, the strip would be amazing!' Calm down Jesamy.

'Ok. I'll pick you up there tomorrow then. 7.30?'

'That's great! 7.30 I'll be at the lighthouse.'

'Good. We'll go get something to eat at Half Moon. I know a good place.'

Shit.

'Ok!'

'Good.' He sounded amused. 'See you.'

'See you!'

I quickly hung up before I could add anymore exclamation points to anything else I said.

*Jakey*

Me and Jesamy were in the hammock together and I could tell there was something she needed to say to me. We sat and rocked together slowly, the side of the hammock cutting into our knees, until we both laid back at the same time with our arms close together. Usually we'd be chattering about all sorts, but this time we were totally quiet, the only other sound was the muffled thumps of System of a Down coming from Ash's bedroom upstairs.

'Jakey,' she said.

'Yes?' I was trying to eat a Refresher, and my back teeth were glued together.

'I think I'm going to meet someone.'

I unstuck my teeth with a snapping sound in my jaw. 'What do you mean?'

'I think I've been asked out.'

'What?'

I shifted to try to look at her, but that made our faces go way too close, so I sat up a bit. 'By who? A boy?'

She smiled. 'He's not a boy.'

'A soldier?' My voice was a little high-pitched.

She laughed this time. 'No. He's not a soldier either. He's just a... man I guess.'

'Who is he?'

'He's called Theo.'

I thought for a bit, but couldn't think of any Theos. 'What?' I eventually said.

'He was the teacher at that university thing. He lent me this.'

She held up a yellow book called *Illuminations* that she'd been reading for the last million years.

'He told me to ring when I'd finished it, so I did. And he said he would meet me at the strip.'

She blushed a bit. 'And maybe we'd get dinner in Half Moon.'

We swung for a while longer, she was in that happy pink warmth of remembering a man's voice.

And I was sitting there feeling confused. Stupidly, I asked 'have you told Ash?'

Her smile went down a bit and it was like I felt the heat leave her cheeks.

'No.' She said slowly. 'I'm not sure I will.'

I mean, I got it, of course I did. 'I won't tell him.'

She let out a breath that I didn't know she'd been holding.

'Thanks, chicken. I'm sorry.'

I shook my head. 'It's fine. So when are you meeting him?'

'Tomorrow. I'll tell Ash that I'm meeting some girls from the course down the strip. Malina and Stephen are at the Fletcher's barbeque. So you and Ash could just have a guy's night? Watch a film with guns in it, play pool down at the club?'

I picked at the tape on my splint so that it gave a sudden vicious twinge of pain. Next to me, Jesamy flinched.

'Oh God. Is it a stupid idea? I won't go. It's stupid.'

'Don't.' I said. 'It's not stupid. Go!'

She was silent and I suddenly felt terrible.

'We'll be ok. Seriously. Anyway. What are you wearing?'

'Ooh.' She brightened up. 'What do you think?'

'Maybe a dress? More than this?' I pointed to her current outfit, which was an extra large O'Neill t-shirt with watermelon stains, and some raggedy denim shorts. 'Wait. Are those mine?'

She looked down at them as if it were the first time she'd seen them. 'Um. Yeah?'

'Scruffbag. Ok. What about your blue dress?'

And that way, by going through her wardrobe with her, naming every single item and imagining what this Theo would think of it, I got her mind off Ash, and me, and underneath it all I sat there and felt the fear that she was leaving me earlier than we'd decided.

*Jesamy*

Theo picked me up at the stubby black and white lighthouse at the start of the strip that we all called the zebra's penis. Ash had offered to take me, but since I'd told him that I was only meeting girls he would never have let me get into a car with Theo. So I'd walked the coast road from Main alone, ignoring the beeps of passing cars, and the shouts of the men in them. I was wearing a sundress from a few years ago that Jakey had chosen. It was tight, and although I had shorts on underneath I still felt exposed. The humidity crept out of the sea and stuck my hair to my neck and back and as I moved it got trapped in the sweat under my arms.

At the lighthouse I sat with my back to the road and stared out at the apricot sky, soft over the water. He was late, or I was early, but it gave me long enough to push my toes into the milled sand and bite my lips the red just before bleeding. I tried to comb the salt from my hair with my fingers.

I heard a car horn, closer, and a truck pulled onto the verge. I stiffened, ready to get up and run to the kiosk over the road if I was hassled. I looked over and Theo was leaning out of the window, 'Hi Jesamy'. He pronounced it Jezemy and it sounded biblical. I got in the truck but was too nervous to speak for a moment. I'd never been so close to him, I could smell sweat through his deodorant, and an edge of marijuana. He looked over at me as I was fastening my seatbelt and flashed me a quick, hard smile, eyetooth slanting the corner of his lip. 'I scared you.'

'No, well, yes, I thought you were-'

'-one of the locals that drive down here and scare the little white girls?'

I was silent. I was ashamed of my translucent skin, my sensitivity, but hurt that he'd lessened a harassment that I felt to be real. I was out of my depth. We had only just driven off the verge and onto the road to Half Moon and I wanted to tell him to stop.

'It's not locals.' I cleared my throat. 'Not just locals.'

He raised his eyebrow without looking at me.

'Soldiers as well. And tourists.'

'All men.'

'Yes. No.'

If I jumped out there, we weren't too far for me to walk back to the garrison, show my ID to the guards and be back home, where the threat of Ash or Stephen pushed most men away. The boys wouldn't have ordered a pizza by then, and I could ask for pineapple and onion on half of it. Theo drove down the strip slowly past the police checkpoints, and the silence became oppressive.

I pulled *Illuminations* out of my bag and wafted it vaguely at him. 'Here's your book by the way.'

'Ah thanks. Just put it in the back.'

I twisted around and left it on the sandy backseat.

He cleared his throat. 'Did you enjoy it?'

'Yeah.'

'Good.'

I completely forgot all the carefully memorised pretty sentences that I had been intending on impressing him with. The silence came back, so he put some music on. It was loud, but still I had to listen carefully for it; a dark bowed bass winding underneath an instrument that was a blend of piano and harp – 'hammered dulcimer', Theo supplied – and it was gothic, mountainous, lonely: twilight music. I closed my eyes and let the road and the music sweep underneath me. It didn't seem to end. Songs, if they could be called that, twined together; motifs wound around the sustained bass, climbing up and into one another, edging into changes of key signature, then crashing down through them again. It was only when I smelt something acrid, molten metal, that I opened my eyes to the industrial outskirts of the town. We drove down the prom past the fountains and went into Old Town via the fort. Theo parked on a backstreet with washing-lines tied between the balconies above and when he cut the engine the music left behind a silence that fell down. His smile was gentle as he said 'Good, yeah?'

As I got out of the truck we tried not to notice that I was the same height as him.



The restaurant was in one of the wooden-shuttered colonials that rambled into each other, with rents through the walls loosely gobbled with cement and growing mosses where the aircon vents leaked into them. When I pointed them out to Theo he said 'yeah, this is the earthquake zone. The new blocks in town fall down all the time'. He jerked his thumb to a stone on the wall engraved with 1900, 'But this place is going nowhere.'

We went through a door almost pinned shut with the weight of bougainvillea laced on top and into the dim light of the bar. The barman greeted us and nodded to the staircase, which we went up, avoiding knocking the paintings that lined it.

We came out on the third floor and walked down a corridor past the kitchens, and up a few concrete steps painted the same terracotta as the walls. They led onto a roof terrace that Theo called 'friends and family'.

There was only one table up there, round, and set for two with candles in wax-heavy wine bottles. I was awkward again at that, and the tea-lights in glass cups, tied to the railings and hung from nails in the walls. Theo prowled. From the table to the railings and back; putting my bag on the chair and then heading back to the steps again.

'What drink will you have?'

'Tonic, with ice.'

'That all?'

'Please.'

He shrugged and walked back down, disappearing inside.

I drifted to the railings. Half Moon swept away in a clutter of terracotta roofs all the way to the bay, stopping inches from the darkening water. Far to the east, the chimneys of the power-station were picked out in red lights against the sky. I felt the same pull then that I always do: home. I had to brace against it otherwise I wouldn't have been able to remain on the roof with a smell of oil and meat blowing from the kitchen vents, waiting for a man I barely knew.

The tiles were dusty and I saw in their concentric stars and looping flowers an Islamic history of the town that I barely recognised. I took my flipflops off and nuzzled my toes into the blue and cream and crimson squares. I turned to Theo coming back up the steps: 'Are these tiles local?' I wanted to sit there at the top of colonial old town, right under the new flight path and meet the town for the first time. He didn't look at the tiles, just put the drinks on the table and sat down.

'I don't know.'

I joined him at the table and took a drink, waiting for him to say more. He twisted his hair up into a topknot, leaving his two dreads hanging at the back.

'Why did you come to my class?'

The abrupt change of subject felt like a rebuke. 'Don't you know?'

'I forgot. There were other things to think about.'

I was stung. I'd already memorised the order of the beads in his dreads. Blue-silver-gold in one, red-gold-feather in the other.

'The university occupation?'

'That as well.'

A woman then. Someone tiny, with a side-shave and piercings, a temper, a flat in the city and a way of smoking that made you want to kiss her. I felt enormous and bleached next to her.

He gestured with his hand: go on.

'I was recommended by my Literature teacher. She said I may as well get a jump start on university by attending a few modules.' Even to myself I sounded suburban.

'Teacher?'

'Yeah.'

'At school?'

I stared at him for a moment. 'Yeah.'

'How old are you?'

A clutch of mopeds chickened in the street below.

'Seventeen.'

He was quiet, and looked over to the jasmine that unfurled its fronds over the railing into the evening. I saw in his gaze some leaning back from me and rushed to stop it: 'But I'm a year ahead in school and I'm eighteen in a bit –' I thought for a moment then helpfully added '– and that's 126 in dog years.'

He smiled at that but whatever he might have said was interrupted by a girl about my age coming up the steps with the first plates. As he helped move candles and drinks for her to put them down, I watched him. His body was so compact I couldn't imagine it, hard and warm, on mine.

Then I could. I tore a piece of bread, dipped it in the hummus and ate it barely a second after the plates touched the table. It was so fresh I could taste the lemon. Theo raised an eyebrow at me but didn't say anything. The girl left and Theo pulled his chair nearer mine, so we could pass plates. Closer, I could see that his eyes were green, not brown, and there was sweat above his upper lip. I got the vertigo I always have when I'm with someone who isn't Ash. Attracted to their difference. Repulsed by it.

'So, how are things at the university? Is the occupation totally over?'

'Huh'. He picked up a baby potato that had rolled off a plate and licked the rosemary and butter from his thumb. 'You ask big questions.'

'What other types are there?'

'I don't know. What is your favourite colour? Do you like music? Do you have a tattoo?'

'Blue. Yes. No. What about you?'

'Green. Yes.' He turned and pulled his t-shirt down at the back of the collar to reveal seven black lines drawn from the side of his neck, trailing over his left shoulder blade. 'What do you want to know?'

Looking at his skin like that made sweat spike out painfully at the back of my knees. I cleared my throat.

'I don't really understand what happened in the city. It's hard to get the full story on the garrison.'

He nodded.

'So why were you occupying? And how did they get you out?'

He picked up a salt-battered ribbon of courgette and ate it slowly.

'It is hard to tell you all of that, because the protest was very big, about a lot of things. Money, what we teach, which language we teach it in, what they let us research. None of us were paid during the occupation.'

'Really? How did you live?'

'I live at home, and work with my father too.'

'Doing what?'

'Air-conditioners. Can I have your olives?' I'd been pulling them out of my salad and piling them at the side of my plate. I looked at his plate and saw a triangular cheese pastry.

'If I can have your pastry.'

'No.' He put the whole thing in his mouth and looked at me very seriously. I giggled, which made me sound twelve years old, so I asked 'How did the occupation end?'

He chewed for a while. 'The army came in, told us to get out, and there was a riot.'

'Shit. Did anyone get hurt?'

'They shot a student.'

'Oh my God. Are they ok?'

'He died.'

I felt unbearably young, and naïve. To cover my confusion I ate a stuffed vine leaf, and then another one.

He pushed his plate away. 'Do you want to know anything else?'

When I looked at him, his face was turned to the side and a clench leapt in his jaw.

We ate silently for a few minutes, but my heart was jittering too hard to speak. I was reminded of how I'd felt in his class, and wondered whether this was worth it, or realistic.

'I'm sorry,' he finally said. 'I didn't realise you were so young. I didn't know what...'

I raised my eyebrows at him. 'Didn't know what?'

'What you wanted. I don't know...'

'What I wanted? What are you talking about?'

He pushed himself back from the table a little, away from me and my confusion.

'I heard things.' He shrugged. 'About your father. I didn't believe it at first because there was a lot of paranoia around. But then you arrived with an...armed guard. And then, I didn't know what to believe.'

My drink had been sweating fat drops of condensation, so that when I raised my glass a streak of water slid down my wrist. I drank, and felt a hot rush of something rise through my chest. I opened my mouth and didn't realise until then it was laughter. A mad bark that I had absolutely no control over.

'What the fuck are you on about?' I asked through snorts. 'You think I'm a *spy*?'

Theo did a confused kind of frown at my response, as if I were laughing at him, which I was, but only partially. 'I don't know. It looked strange. Someone from the garrison coming to my class the day of the riot. In an army truck. With two soldiers.'

That made me laugh again. 'Two soldiers! The other guy was my brother. He's eighteen, Jesus.'

Theo shrugged. 'I'm sorry. Like I said, I heard things about your father.'

'So I was supposed to come to your class and, what? Report back on what I'd heard? About *Derrida*? I wouldn't be able to if I'd tried!'

He was annoyed now. 'Ok! I said I'm sorry. Let's leave it.'

I shook my head, 'I can't believe it. I thought you invited me here because. I dunno. Because you wanted to.' I looked down so I didn't have to see his pity. 'And now I realise that you didn't. It's funny.' But I'd stopped laughing. I pushed my chair back and stood up.

At this, he reached over and grabbed my side of the table. 'Hey. Wait.'

I looked down at him. 'Why?'

'Because, hey, sit down. I didn't just want you to come here because of this. But I don't know anything about you. I had to ask. Please. Sit down.'

I sat, and he stayed leaning towards me.

'I didn't just think you were...' he shook his head and kind of laughed at himself. 'I also think you're... I don't know.'

'Yes?'

'Nice.'

'I'm not sure what that means.'

'Lovely?'

He looked so earnest when he said this that I snorted, because, maybe – a flicker of relief – maybe he was just a man. 'You think I'm lovely?'

'Yes.'

We looked at each other.

'So, now we've established that I'm not an undercover agent, what are we supposed to do?'

He laughed and scratched his scalp under the topknot. 'Argh. I don't know. For now, just talk to me. Tell me about...your brother. What's his name?'

For some reason now that he'd told me about how paranoid the occupation had sent them all, I felt able to tell him about never having been off the garrison without Ash, and how strange things looked now I was out there alone. From Ash, we talked about surfing, and music, and Jakey. I'd even told him about how nervous I was about university. By the time the girl brought the desserts we were comfortable enough for Theo to pick a wafer of melon and roll it around a strawberry for me.

'Wait. One minute', and he shook a few grounds of black pepper over it before putting it in my hand. His fingers touched mine, warmer than the night. I chewed it. It tasted of melon and strawberry with pepper on it. It must have shown on my face and he shook his head.

I ate a square honey and raisin pastry, laughing, and then I realised that I could hear ringing. It was coming from my bag, from Ash's shit mobile with about 15 cents of credit on that he'd made me take just in case. I waited for it to stop. It did, then started again, and then again, and again.

Despite the way that it made Theo turn his head away from me, I knew I'd have to answer. I didn't recognise the number, but it was garrison.

'I'm sorry, is it OK if I get this?'

'I'll get another drink for us.'

He stood and turned towards the kitchen steps. I picked up.

'It's me.' I could hear in Ash's voice that he was pale. In the background there was what sounded like a car engine and coughing.

'What's wrong?'

'Jakey. Can you meet us at North?'

'What's happened?'

'We were only playing chess', the sound was muffled, like the phone was being pressed into a t-shirt, and I heard Jakey saying something very faintly. Ash was back. 'Just come, quickly. He needs you.'

I hung up and looked down at my hand on the table. I was already trembling. As Theo came towards me I pushed my chair back and there was a sweat-imprint of my thighs on the seat.

'Are you ok? Who was that?'

'I'm so sorry, but I need to go. It was my brother. I need to get back. I'm sorry. I'll ring a taxi.'

'I can give you a lift, if that's ok?'

'Yes that would be great, thanks' I was zipping my bag and edging my toes back into my flipflops. As we walked back through the restaurant, the barman shouted something over to Theo, but he muttered back and shook his head. His hand was on my arm, but I only registered it when he took it off to open the car door for me.

We avoided the traffic lights on the coast and took the dark back roads out of town up to North. With the honey from the pastry still at the back of my throat I was squeezed by a panic that made it hard to breathe.

'Your brother?' Theo eventually asked.

'Yes', I bit at a hangnail until it tore into the flesh and the blood welled.

'What's wrong with him?'

'Nothing. It's my little brother, Jakey. Ash didn't say, but I think they'd been to the line.'

Theo didn't ask what they'd been doing up there, but when I looked at his profile after a few minutes of silence, it had hardened and I didn't know how to ask what he was thinking. He looked like a stranger again. The truck was a stranger to me too, with the dust on the dashboard and the ragged suspension which sent bolts through my spine as we went over potholes. It was pitch-dark, but soon enough the wire of the garrison came flashing silver at the edge of our headlights. As we approached North, Theo pulled over into a eucalyptus grove at the side of the road and we got out. I shouldn't have let him, but he walked me to the gates, again with a hand on my arm. All I could hear was the scream of cicadas and the hammering in my temples. Ash's car was parked next to the barrier-hut and he was standing a metre or so behind the guard. He was the mirror image of me, whiter and taller and younger than I was expecting, and some part of me flinched from that. The guard was only Tan but, as Theo came closer, he twitched a hand onto his holster and I felt the flicker of animosity between them. I ran past Ash and Tan to the car. Jakey was laid out awkwardly on the backseat, paperwhite and with vomit dotting his t-shirt. He was breathing and I took his pulse through the open window. It was steady so I turned back to Ash. 'What happened?'

'I'll explain in a bit, let's just get him home.'



He looked over at Tan, who was talking to Theo and gesturing between the gates and back to the hut, where another guard was watching. A rifle was slung over his shoulder, and I realised for the first time that it was real, not just uniform in the shape of a semi-automatic. Suddenly it made so much sense. There was the wire, and then the guards with their adult-sized guns, and then the floodlights and the barriers. There were four rings of protection between me and Theo now, and he was only just realizing it. He lived on the outside of that, but past all those layers, at the bottom of the hill, was my home. He stood there small and dark and bearlike in the light. Ash loitered behind Tan and he may have been smirking. Theo nodded with his face set, but held up a finger and, ignoring Ash and Tan, took one step too far. In a fluid motion Tan unholstered his pistol and cocked it, with a sound that I'd never heard in real life before.

Theo froze, but then leaned forward and pushed a CD into my hand, 'the hammered dulcimer, if you want it.' I looked at his face, but it was too late. He was on the wrong side of a gun, he had to be a foreigner to me now. I shook my head. I wouldn't have been able to listen to it again without thinking of him. I gave it back, and he laughed sharply, then walked out through the gates and Ash and I got into the car. As we drove through the barriers I turned back but couldn't see Theo in the dark.

*Jakey*

The thing that happened at Zeke's was just because I was tired of being left out all the time. Malina and Stephen were out somewhere, Jesamy had gone to meet Theo, and me and Ash were supposed to get some pizza and hang out. So when he gave me some change and the phone number of the takeaway I guess I was just disappointed. He headed out about eight onto the scrub, and instead of ordering a pizza like he told me to, I followed him. For once he didn't tell me to turn back to the house. 'Where are we going?'

'Just to pick some stuff up.'

'Hooch?' He looked at me like how do you know that and then smiled.

'I suppose so'. He laughed and shook his head, 'dark horse.'

His admiration felt quite nice, then he said out of nowhere, 'who's she out with tonight again?'

I was a tiny bit flustered because she'd told me to keep Theo a secret. 'Just someone from that uni course she did I think.'

'Oh yeah, I remember her telling me about him. Thingy, what's-his-name?'

I thought it was ok then, maybe Jesamy had mentioned him when I wasn't around. I just said 'Theo', and Ash nodded.

'That's it, yeah.'

We walked over the fire break and cut up through into where the scrubland turns into woods. It was getting dark and a few bats were out swapping through the trees. As we crashed through the bushes my legs got scratched and the air smelt of crushed leaves and sap. We'd made dens up here before Ash suddenly got too cool, and I wondered if that was where we were going, we were headed straight for the threestruck, a tree that got hit by lightning every winter. It would've been about sixstruck by then.

'Nearly here,' Ash sounded muffled, and when I looked around he was ducking under the branches of an old crabby pine. I followed him in. The branches nearly touched the ground and inside it was pitch-black and dry. He started climbing up so I followed with my bad fingers cocked

out at a painful angle. We went about four metres to the top where the needles were thinning out and I could see the sky again with the stars starting to poke out. Wrapped onto one of the branches was a two-litre plastic bottle, like an old fanta one, with clear liquid in it. Ash started cutting through the rope holding it on and then gave it to me and downclimbed.

'Right, drop it down to me' he said so I did, and even though it bounced against a few branches it didn't burst. As soon as I climbed down he said, 'OK, race you.'

'Where?' – but he'd already ducked out of the branches and started legging it back through the woods with the bottle under his arm.

It was awesome, ploughing through scrub and tall grasses that dry-snapped against my knees, I grabbed handfuls of whatever I passed and ended up with twigs and pine-needles and seeds and what turned out to be a thistle head which I quickly dropped. Ash was always ahead, but my pulse was up and the insects screamed me on, and the slashes on my legs were burning and maybe bleeding. We kind of skidded down the scree-hill outside the house at the same time and scrambled up the rocks to our front path, cracked down on the broken paving stone, and for some reason legged it out to the street and tagged the car by jumping onto the bonnet. We both looked at each other, red and sweating and with our hair pasted over our eyes, and burst out laughing. The air was fizzing with the orange streetlights. I looked back over down the rocks to the scrub and realised how dark it was. I was ready for a shower, and a cold drink and maybe even a slice of pizza, so I hopped down.

'Oh right, are you not coming then?' Ash had his hand on the driver's door and swung himself in. I had no idea where we were going but I said 'yeah' and quickly got in. Pizza could go fuck itself I thought, even though I was starting to get hungry. He put the Chilis on and that was my favourite Ash, tapping out the beat of Dosed on the steering wheel, driving as mellow as the music. We went right up to North, but as we pulled through the barriers, the spotlights came on and the guard came out of the hut. I was like, shit, but Ash laughed and held his hand out saying 'Tan, how's it going?'

The guard grabbed his hand like kind of shaking, kind of holding.

'Not bad man, not bad. Where you out so late, with the little one?' He nodded through at me and even though I was pissed off at him calling me that I noticed in the glare that he was actually young, and hot. His eyes were pale and I wished I could've seen whether they were blue or grey or what.

'School trip to see the infidels.'

Tan snorted like Ash had said something funny. 'I'll be on until midnight. If Zeke's there you'd better get back before then otherwise I can't help you.'

'I hear you, see you then.' They grabbed hands again and then we drove out.

Out of the garrison there were no cars about, just us and the buzz of the pylons and the smell of the fields. I'd got really thirsty so I asked Ash if I could have some hooch. He just laughed and said 'go slow'. Even though I was expecting it, it was still a shock, like pineapple juice on fire. I had another mouthful then Ash held his hand out and had a swig too and I knew I'd passed some kind of test. He took the turning up past the firing ranges and after that there were no streetlamps so the darkness crept in through the windows and filled all the spaces in the car. I could've stayed like that forever with my belly warm and the air warm and just us two not even needing to talk because the music was doing it for us.

We headed straight inland for a long time, then Ash pulled off the road and onto a dirt-track that kicked tiny stones up onto the windscreen. We kind of coasted to a stop and Ash said 'we're here.' I got out and without the music and the engine I realised how quiet it was. There weren't even any insects shrieking in the bushes. There weren't any bushes, it was sandfield all around. I had a thought – maybe we're on the line – and then a guy came out of the darkness and I knew we were.

He had a dirty shotgun wrapped on him like a handbag, and he came right up to us. Then he was grabbing Ash's hand and saying 'what bring you here tonight? Where the sister? This not her, surely?' Ash was like, 'Zeke, Jakey, Jakey, Zeke', then the guy who was Zeke slapped me on the back and they walked off. I just looked at the ground and followed them through the darkness. Behind some bamboo there was a house with a little porch, and there were two kids on it cuddled up on a scraggy sofa watching football on telly. They didn't look up as we walked through. Inside

was grey with smoke and the heat was worse. A couple of guys were sitting round a little table playing cards and a few more were leaning on a bar at the back of the room with a chessboard of all things. There was a standing freezer with loads of glasses in it, football shirts all over the walls, and a few hookah pipes set up. It looked like a pub but I couldn't see any alcohol anywhere. Ash got a glass from the freezer and poured it full of hooch and Zeke said something in his language and laughed at him. Ash kind of mocked back 'harshing my buzz, man' in a fake whiny accent, then they went to sit at one of the little tables with a chessboard.

'Jakey, go get a coke if you want', Ash said, 'then come and watch the masters at work.'

I have to say I was a bit disappointed that Ash was sneaking out of the garrison at night with a bottle of hooch to come play chess on the line. It seemed like the punchline was missing. But whatever. I was fine with just watching. I pulled up a stool and poured some hooch into my can of coke. When I looked up, Zeke and Ash had done the first half of the game of moving all the pawns around almost like a dance, click-click-click-click-click in about fifteen seconds. Maybe it wasn't going to be as boring after all.

As they picked up the pace, a few guys drifted over from their games and pulled chairs up to our table. It should have been uncomfortable, with men pressed against me with their smell of sweat and hair-gel, but it was like I didn't feel it. I had literally no idea what was happening in the game, so I stared at the guy's arm on the chair next to me. I could see all the muscles and ligaments knotted up under his skin, and the hair was more golden than brown. His watch said twenty past ten and I would normally have worried about curfew, but the murmurings and quiet creakings of the men leaning in on their seats were making me more chilled than usual. I started to droop a bit, my eyes were scratchy, and possibly my head lowered a bit onto the guy next to me. I wasn't asleep, but when he moved his arm I definitely woke up. He was offering Zeke the hookah pipe. It was Ash's turn, so Zeke took a deep breath from it and let the smoke out slowly. Then when Ash had played, he handed it to him.

Ash had a drag, but when he blew it out, he also let out a tiny baby cough which kind of embarrassed me because it made Zeke smile. Then when he passed the pipe back, Zeke shook his head and nodded at me. Ash hesitated, then gave it to me and just said, 'go slow' again. So I

knew it was a test. I took a massive breath of it in, and held the smoke in my lungs. It was soft and tasted kind of like basil. It was only when I breathed it out that it got weird.

Somehow, it felt like the smoke was turning me inside out as I exhaled, and I did a cough. Which caught in my throat and made me cough again, then again, then again, then again. My lungs were being forced up and I couldn't breathe and the smoke was still coming out of me, and it was starting to burn. Zeke laughed, and Ash did an awkward smile and said something but I couldn't really hear them because I was starting to panic. The air in the room was too hot and my heart was fucking pounding and I was starting to retch. I stood up, or I was already standing up, then I stumbled out of the room to the porch where the kids were and they looked at me this time.

I went round the back of the house and kept coughing but everything was connected suddenly and I started throwing up and the hooch was as warm as when it went down. I was falling and grabbed the side of the house and kept heaving then my fists were clenched and I was sliding down the wall on the knuckles of my good hand and landing in the sand that was wet from puke but I was still going, and threw up on the wall, and my hand, which was bleeding from the wall and I still couldn't breathe. I crawled away and on my hands and knees I put my head down and tried to sip the air, a tiny tiny bit. I was making strangling noises which were basically my lungs wringing themselves out. The puke tasted like blood and that really scared me. Then I slowed a bit and more air got in me and I could start to see again even though I hadn't realised I was blind.

Feet were in front of me, brown skin in flipflops and toenails the same shape as mine. Ash was picking me up under my arms like a ragdoll and saying 'fuck are you OK' and I was like 'yeah fine yeah fine' but I was maybe slurring because I kept getting my lips caught in my teeth. My pulse was ticking crazy and something was wrong. He walked me to the car so that my feet were barely touching the ground but when he opened the door of the backseat I saw the sky and it was too dark. That's what I remember, the sky, because I must've snapped my head back before I hit the floor.

Ash

It's stupid but you ask her on the drive back to the house, *so that's Theo then?*

She's staring straight ahead at the road pointing towards the lights of the houses at the bottom of the hill. *Who?*

*Bullshit.*

*How do you know?*

Your feet and teeth are clenched in a hard fury. *Know that you're running off the garrison to fuck some greasy local that I've never heard of?*

*I'm not fucking anyone. How do you know what he's called?*

You try to light a fag but the wind is coming in through the windows too hard for it to catch, so you take the other hand off the steering wheel to cup the air still around the fag.

*Will you just drive the car please and tell me how you know his name?*

She's treating you like the criminal in this, and the fucking fag won't light and it makes you so angry that you drag the handbrake up and scrape to a halt at the side of the slip-road leading to the fields.

*How do you think? Your little bitch told me.*

She stares at you for a second. *That's why you did this?*

*What?*

*Got Jakey twatted.*

You snort. *I think we both know he's a lightweight.*

*Sorry?*

*Come on. He can't hold his drink.*

*You think this is drink?* She twists and points at Jakey struggling to wake up. Shake your head and climb out to light the bastard cigarette for the fiftieth time. She starts trying to drag a blurry Jakey out of the backseat, but she can't so snaps at you *fucking help me would you?*

You find a bottle of water in the footwell and tip it on his head to wake him up but this pisses her off and she slaps you, hard in the face, and you stop it.

*What?*

*You'll drown him. Jesus Christ just get him out the car!*

You manage to pull him out and start to puppet him to the side of the road but she grabs him off you and sinks down with her arms around him. You don't bother anymore with either of them, they're welcome to each other, stalk off to sit on a rock to smoke the fag to the vicious end so that you're almost chewing the filter. They're sitting there rocking back and forth wittering together so you walk off to the edge of the fields in your bare feet. The dirt is red even in the moonlight and soft as dust but even that pisses you off, you want something hard and painful to fling yourself against. A couple of hundred metres away there's gas canisters stored behind a chain-link fence so you run up to it and throw your fist as hard as you can against the chain-link, it hurts, so you do it again.



*Jakey*

I went from blackness to drowning. In water that was going up my nose and in my mouth and I couldn't escape. Then I sat up and escaped and my head jolted against something metal. I couldn't get a grip on anything because nothing was in the right place, asphalt away below right and metal suddenly left, and something soft trapping me and I kept jerking until I could get it in the right order. It was the car, with my head hanging out the backseat, and the doorframe against the back of my head. And Ash standing there with a bottle of water drowning me. When I moved he helped me unroll myself from the car and walked with me to the side of the road. I still had no fucking idea where I was and kept tripping over my feet and tangling him up too. But then he was Jesamy, and she lowered me to the side of the road, then sat down herself and I scuffled back into her. She put her arms around me and kind of rocked me slowly which was soothing because it matched the way the world was moving anyway. Things got a bit righter. The asphalt was warm and gritty on my feet and I recognised that. She smelled of raspberry conditioner and also a bit of puke. I told her that. I felt her laugh against my back, 'I think that's you, puppy.'

'Oh.'

We were quiet and waited for more of the world to come back. It was coming back too slowly for my thoughts, because they were going faster than I could really think them. The speed of my heartbeat, then I started getting bad again, like the ticking crazy pulse and fast breathing and the darkness all around us. I had a fear of falling. The only good thing was Jesamy, but sometimes she wasn't there, so I'd grab her arm and she'd squeeze me back and I'd remember her again. After another while, when the world hadn't come back enough, I whispered 'am I dying?' but not really to her.

'Not yet, sweetheart.'

There she was again. Then not again.

I whispered, 'why not?'

'Because I'm here and I won't let you. And also, you're not dying because you're just really fucking stoned and even though it's scary it will get better I promise.'

'How do you know?'

'Know what?'

'That I'm really fucking stoned?'

I did a massive shiver that made my teeth clicker together.

'Because you stink of weed. And because that dickhead rang me and told me to come to North and get you.'

'Dickhead who?'

'That one', and she raised our arms and pointed to a dark thing sitting on a rock smoking a fag.

Ash. I remembered the house and the kids and the chess and the hookah thing. I shivered again and suddenly my whole body was juddering. She felt it and started stroking my arms up and down.

Then I got scared of how long she'd been doing that and time seemed too big for me to really take in. I tried to have a conversation about that, about time and how big it is, and how it is never really one thing but lots of things and never ever settles but moves and moves and moves and there's no such thing as 'telling the time'. Jesamy listened, I could feel her listening, but then the strands of thought branched out and got too big to possibly hold onto and to say and I started crying.

I don't remember how long that went on for.

Later I was in the car again, but with Jesamy still attached to me so I was OK. Ash was driving down the hill to our house with the streetlamps flickering through the windows and he tried to say to me 'do you think you're alright now Jakey?' but Jesamy just said in this steel voice 'don't talk to him'. We weren't sure which him she meant so we both stayed silent.

Later, I was on the futon in Ash's room. The aircon was on and I was under a duvet and there was a glass of water on the floor and even though things were still awful, they were a lot better. Jesamy was sitting on the end of the bed reading and as long as she was there I was OK.

Later, Ash was there on the floor with his back against the wall and Jesamy was very quietly shouting at him, 'Of course he fucking ghosted! And you knew he would!' He wasn't replying so she kept on going, 'I leave the house for an hour and you take him up to Zeke's and get him smashed off his tits.' She rubbed her face like she was crying, but Jesamy didn't ever cry. When she spoke again her voice was tight. 'I don't know whether you were trying to punish me or him, but congratulations, it worked.'

Ash was still silent, staring at something on his hand.

'Please just go. Seriously. Fuck off.' Ash sat for another little bit, then stood up and walked out. My eyes closed again with a whisper like a crash.

*Jesamy*

After I'd got Jakey to go to sleep I went back to my room with a two litre bottle of water and locked the door. I stayed up late, late enough to hear Ash come upstairs again and close his bedroom door, and late enough to hear Malina and Stephen get in and whisper in and out of the shower room. Late enough to watch dawn hit the buildings of HQ with a pink and orange light. Sometime after that I fell asleep.

It was midday when I woke up. The sky was cloudy and I could hear Ash and Jakey outside in the yard, so I showered and went back to my room. I couldn't face either of them. I knew that Jakey had been manipulated into telling Ash about Theo. I knew he was just a boy, and Ash was so much cleverer than him. Still, I felt betrayed. But worse than that was the guilt of my own culpability. For the sake of curiosity, my own vanity, the idea that Theo could have liked me, I'd left Jakey behind at the mercy of Ash. And it was the mercy of a merciless man. I hadn't realized before that he would punish his own brother to control me. But now I knew.

It had become clear that I couldn't leave Jakey alone, not with Stephen, or Malina, or Ash, or any other adult who was supposed to be responsible for his welfare. This was the second time Jakey had been hurt because I was the only one who could protect him. To everyone else, including Ash, Jakey was worthless – to be used as a pawn or a punchbag and it would get him killed, I had no doubt about that. Maybe not the next time, or the time after that, but at some point he'd be hurt beyond the point of no return.

I pushed open the balcony door. There was no breeze out there, and as I leaned on the railing the heat radiated off the scrub. That kind of breathlessness was a storm growing out over the sea, but whether it would break that evening or two days later or not at all I didn't know. Further down the fire-break near the stand of carobs I saw Rob's red-haired wife Tina walking with a dog and a small child. Transparent waves blurred their legs so that it looked as if they were wading through water. I wondered whether anyone had told her what midday on the island meant. As they approached, she waved up at me, but I pretended not to recognise her underneath her sun-hat. I hung my head, looking onto the porch below and, as I did, my hair fell around my face. I stayed like that for a minute looking at the static porch furniture and a stream of ants lining across the table

into the mouth of an empty ice-tea can. The sun drilled onto the exposed skin on the back of my neck, so I fell back into the cooler dimness of my room.

The ceiling fan was on its highest setting, whirring and clicking and occasionally lurching to the left where the casing was coming loose. I laid directly under it on sheets that were slightly damp with my sweat and closed my eyes. Me and Ash were what we were, and there was no-one to blame but ourselves, because I'd always let him.

A few months into high school I was moved up into Ash's year when the teachers found out I'd been doing his homework. We became twins then, and not in a cute way. Instead we became one person with the power of two. Only weeks after that, a boy had taken the piss out of me for something, and I felt Ash before I saw him, his fist slamming into the boy's cheek, making his whole head snap to the side. The boy spat a mouthful of blood and mucus and a chip of tooth onto the tiles and Ash made him clean it up with his backpack before a teacher saw it. I don't remember the boy's name, but I remember that sick rush I got, and the way people moved aside for us when we went into class. That was it. Immunity.

Of course, regiments came in and out, and the intake got steadily more brutal as we got older. Ash had to shift from the defensive to the actively offensive, and no one ever stepped over the lines he'd drawn around his territory: the third desk at the back of every class, first place in the tuck shop queue, Poles. And me. I was the heart of his territory, and no-one got a chance of going anywhere near me.

I was leashed to him, but as long as I never strayed outside of his reach I didn't realise it. Theo had inadvertently taught me that tug against my throat telling me I couldn't escape.

*Ash*

Later when you go in her room she's cross-legged on the bed reading. Neither of you speak. There's a storm brewing that's not breaking. The room is stuffy and the purple walls are bruised in the stormlight, the windows are open so you go to the balcony and lean out. Nothing, no air comes in, but it's dustier somehow and your arms are smoothed with the talcum air. You bring them in to show her already the dust caught in the hairs. She doesn't look up so you say *what you reading?* even though the cover hiding her face says **Alias Grace**.

*Go away* she says back, no facial expression, no eyes no anger no nothing. Closed as the room and the still air. In that kind of light you suddenly can't understand anything and especially not her.

*It was for the best you know*, you say, no real idea about what, just something to do with Jakey and Theo mixed up.

She looks up at that, the blue in her eyes completely disappeared by the rims around her iris and the size of her pupils in the dim light. She keeps staring at you.

*Yeah. I guess.*

You should be relieved but those black eyes drawn on white paper makes you shudder. No room on the bed for you, no room in the room.

Something makes you shut the door behind you when you leave, and out on the landing you can hear chatter of birds in the carobs and Jakey bouncing a ball against the wall. You swing down the stairs trying to force the air back to your lungs and head out to teach him how to shoot some hoops.

*Jesamy*

I left the house by the porch gate whilst the boys were playing basketball by the front door. There were so few places I could go to be alone. The scrub took on my footprints in the white dust and I walked feeling exposed, expecting them to notice me and call my name, but the only sounds were crackings in the undergrowth. Birds darted between branches. On the upper-woods were the skeleton trees that were struck every winter by lightning. Bleached silver with a rattle when the wind blew through them. I sat underneath a dead pine and it smelled so good that I laid down. The rock was porous and felt like coral beneath me, its heat spread through my arms and legs and when I pressed my ear to the rock I thought I could hear the slow uncoilings of the snakes denned in the cave systems.

When I got up I headed over to the jeep graveyard, a bowl-shaped crater in the scrub. No one knew what the jeeps were doing up there, they looked like they'd been off-roading across the scrub and had just run out of fuel and been abandoned. They were half-skeletal already, with lentisk and peagrass growing through the chassis and over the steering wheels. There was one high up on the side of the crater, perched with its nose jutting over the edge as if about to take the short flight to the rocks below. Its sides were mottled and flaking with rust, both tyres had rotted into the scrub and the doors yawned in a gap-toothed skull. On one side there was a crude smiley face spray-painted in yellow. I knew what would happen next. The yellow would wash out to white, bleach to transparent, then the face would show sky-light through its narrow curves. It would open the jeep out to the breeze. The wind would blow through it and batter it with grains of sand. The smile would yearn into a hole, the hole into a rusted cancer, the cancer into almost nothingness. It would dessicate and fall to the dust.

Without Ash the same would happen to me, I was sure of it. But things were starting to change. We weren't allowed to talk about it with Jakey, but in a few months we would leave the island to go somewhere else. There was a university in a city back in a home country that neither of us had ever been to. But it had a park, and was only fifteen miles from the sea. They taught Philosophy there, and Engineering. I didn't want to go, but it wasn't my choice. Without Ash what did I have? I'd never had a job, had sex, paid a bill, paid for anything, used a cash machine, called

a taxi, caught a bus. I didn't have a bank account, a driving license. I'd never done any of the things that I looked like I could do. I had clothes and books and teddybears and a bike. But I owned nothing apart my name, and even part of that belonged to Ash as well.

In this place we'd live together. It would be cold, much colder than we were used to, and if he wanted to hold my hand in the snow, he would. If we met in the hallway at night and he wanted to lead me back to bed and climb in and fit his body around mine, he would. No one would know that the black haired boy and the white haired girl with the same last name were siblings, not married. He could put a ring on my finger and I'd be his.

I had no idea what he would do to have me, but it was starting to look like he wouldn't stop until he'd won. Out there in the jeep graveyard I came up with a plan to kill two birds with one stone: to save Jakey for a while, however briefly, and to escape Ash. I would tell Ash we'd be leaving behind a message that would protect Jakey. I'd make Ash into an avenging angel, a beautiful kind of brutal, the necessary kind that holds back evil. And all the while I'd be slowly, subtly, untying all the knots that bound us together. If at any point he stopped playing along, I would. If he didn't, I wouldn't. It was all in his hands. But I knew that at some point he was going to push it too far, and it would wrench us apart.

Before any of that, though, we had to go out for dinner, just like normal, because no one would be able to know.



*Jakey*

The next day I knew something wasn't right when I tried to open Jesamy's door in the morning and it was locked. Ash seemed a bit quiet and worried, and wouldn't talk to me about the night before other than telling me that I'd made a fool out of us both when I'd thrown up all over Zeke's place. There was a lot I didn't remember, but things came through in little shocked lurches, like missing a step walking down the stairs. Jesamy had been with us, but she was supposed to be out with that guy in Half Moon and I wondered how she'd got to us. I didn't know how much Ash knew, but couldn't ask him without accidentally telling him more. I had to get the thoughts out of my head, and the only way I could do that was to go outside and bounce the basketball off the wall again and again until I couldn't hear anything else anymore. Ash joined me later on and we bounced the ball off the wall between us with the bass thump and top whine that was so soothing.

When Malina and Stephen left to go to the Mess for the night, Jesamy appeared again, drifting past the front door to go to the yard. We stopped bouncing and clustered around her like flies on shit. Away from the basketball, my hands felt tight and everything was a little bit closer than I was expecting, including the ground. Going into the house I stumbled, desperate to know if she was angry with me, but when I approached her with a look in my eye that said *have you got a minute*, she shook her head, then smiled brightly at but not at both of us and said, 'right, shall we do lobster shack tonight?'

So that was it. We got our flipflops on and some change out of the alms box in the kitchen, then got in the car and drove out to the shack, Midlake on too loud to talk.

The shack was out on a bit of headland past Petrol Bay and from the front it looked fine, just a tin-roofed box with benches outside. It wasn't until you were up there sitting under the umbrellas that you realised that the loud noise rumbling over the radio was actually waves coming right under your feet and booming against the back walls of the caves near the carpark. In my mind we were just on a thin crust of rock above the huge fall of stones and water and it was hard to concentrate on eating when that was on my mind.

The lobster when it came was realer looking than I'd been expecting. Before when we'd eaten there I'd had lobster salad or rolls or whatever, with normal sized bits of meat in them, but

not this huge red animal laid out in its basket like a dog in its bed. Ash did the cracking open of it with his sharp teeth showing, and piled the legs and antlers and shells in a special bin clipped to the side of the table.

I wasn't hungry, but I also hadn't eaten all day and Jesamy, even though she wasn't looking at me, was building me a plate of lobster bits and chips and salad so I started eating. It took ages. When I'd finished I grabbed a bread roll and stuffed some in my mouth to wash it all down with blandness. The evening smelled of warm salt but like it was cooling down, and the way the air slipped over me left me shivery and weird. I was so sweaty that I wanted to wipe the bread over my face and neck to dry me off a bit.

Walking back to the car afterwards, sometimes my legs would tremble although I thought it was just the heat. I felt the whole time like I needed a shower, and every time I shivered my mind would flick me up a picture of the bin of legs, and I would remember that a few hours ago that lobster was real and now it was dead inside me. The grease still on my fingers and the salty taste on my tongue were proof. The stony asphalt under the car seemed to purr into me and all I wanted was to sit still and be so hungry that I almost wasn't there. The flicker of the streetlamps through the car windows made me queasy so I closed my eyes, but even in the darkness I felt the waves rise inside me.

At home I went straight to bed in my room. It was so humid the sheets were damp and the sand from my feet scratched my legs as I pulled them up to roll into a ball. With the fan on and the windows open I could hear Jesamy and Ash out in the yard emptying match-boxes and dealing for Texas Hold-'Em. I lasted as long as it took for Ash to open a packet of crisps and then as he tinkled them into a bowl I started retching. I shuddered and yawked the whole damn night. I thought my throat was gonna rip open. That lobster was hurled into the toilet and then into the shower tray and back into the toilet and once into the airing cupboard that I mistook for the toilet at about 4am.

I never left the house the next day because I'd get a feeling like I needed to puke and I'd have to sit on the toilet with my head in the sink until the world stopped being so pink. My throat

was swollen and my tongue felt huge and I felt a fist where my throat was – a fist that wanted to fall upwards and punch my teeth right out. It was like my body didn't know what was normal again.



*Jesamy*

The next day, Jakey was still at home in bed, so me and Ash went down to the Officer's Club and found an old concrete umbrella stand that stood useless by the shower-block. Ash came up with the idea: with his mask on he'd hug the block to him as jumped off the pier, then run along the bottom with it in the deep water. I'd skim above him on the board and wait for him to come up, then I'd put the mask on, dive down and do the same. Except I didn't.

I paddled out above him, then when he came up asked him if that was what he was made of. So he went down again and pushed out further that time. Then again, further, further than he probably could. After half an hour it got deeper, and we were drifting ever closer to the headland. Nothing ahead but the barbed wire sea-walls of the power-station. It was taking him longer to come up from each dive, and he was more out of breath. The last time he half-heaved himself onto the board. He was grey and shaking a bit as he took the mask off. We were only about 200 metres away from the sea-walls, so I dared him to run the bottom until he touched the foundation blocks. He put the mask back on and slipped from the board quietly. That was when I turned and paddled as hard as I could back to the Officer's Club. I was quarter of the way before he surfaced and realised I'd left without him. My laughter felt unsteady and gave me energy. I sleeked my arms in and out of the water, feeling my shoulders and back burning from the effort. I'd never moved as quickly and I felt myself becoming a seal, or a long-winged sea-bird. The water was dark and choppy and the thought of him swimming exhausted through it made me giggle again. I trusted him not to ruin it by drowning. When I got to the club I pulled the board out of the water and roped it to the roof of the car. As I showered I could see him, still kicking halfway across the bay. I went inside and got an ice-cream, one of those with tiny smarties in a tube that you could pour on top. I ate it standing at the bar, and the barman avoided my eyes as he cleaned glasses. It was so good and so cold that I got another one straight after.

I wandered back out and climbed onto the pier railings to eat it. They were salt-blistered but the ladder from the water led straight up there, and I waited for Ash at the top. When he appeared he was panting and looked at me with no particular expression: 'Hey.'

'Oh hey. How's it going?'

'Not too shabby.' But he started coughing as he said it, and held onto the railings as he did chest-deep hacks.

I patted him on the back with a limp hand. 'Oh dear. Did you swallow some water?'

He took a few shuddering breaths before saying 'a bit.'

'Hm. Ice-cream?'

He looked at it and yawned. 'Water, for fuck's sake.'

'Alright, calm down.'

We walked to the water fountain and he got on his knees and drank straight from the tap. We drove home after, and he didn't ask why I'd done it.

*Jakey*

I didn't seem to get better. There was something wrapped up in my guts like a creature trapped in seaweed. A couple of nights after the lobster Malina and Stephen were at the Mess and I was lying on the sofa whilst Ash started frying some onions for dinner. I was just about to fall asleep when he cut himself slicing one. It was pretty gory, he went to score the skin really delicate from the outside, but instead the knife slipped over the skin and got him good in the thumb. He said 'fuck', and dropped the knife in the sink. Even though I was watery and dizzy I held a tea-towel tight round the thumb and then had to take my t-shirt off and wrap it around on top because he'd gone in so deep. It bled and bled and bled and bled. After about ten minutes the blood was still oozing right through the shirt and had started drying in lines down his arm. Ash looked like a string of milk, his eyes were black, and he started to look like, 'uh, I don't know what to do now Jakey'. Then Jesamy was in the room, blazing like she was the one dripping blood all over the place. There was a bag of oranges that she dropped and they rolled across the floor. She put him on the chair in the living room then started doing things with paper-towels and bandages. Ash just sat and swayed a little bit as she gripped off the circulation from his thumb. I went back and lay down on the sofa. It was the blue one in a stripy soft fabric and it smelled of suncream. Every time I smelled it it reminded me of being sick, but it also smelled safe, like I knew where I was.

The whole time, Jesamy was murmuring to Ash little things, like 'shit I think we'll have to amputate', 'take your belt off and bite down on it' and 'Jakey can you pass that saw'. Ash kind of laughed at one point, his lips were still blue, but I think he meant it. The smell of dettol drifted over with the fried onions, and I felt like my head was a huge brass bowl with a marble in the bottom. I felt the sides of the bowl start tilting, like someone just picked it up, and the marble started to roll around the bottom of it. The sound it made was a clear, sharp ringing, that got deeper and tighter with each tilt of the bowl. At first it wasn't too bad, but the bowl tilted quicker and the marble rolled faster and faster. I felt the sound of it press against the inside of my ears hard as aeroplane pressure and tried to draw pictures against the pile of the rug to distract myself but it was no good because I couldn't breathe much. I stood up to go out to the veranda but my legs buckled with each turn of the brass bowl so sometimes I had to fall onto my hands until the bowl tilted away and

I was thrown back standing. Somehow I got outside and I fell against the railings. The paint was peeling and they were slippery with salt and my sweat. I tried to hold onto this image under my fingers instead of the brass bowl. The air had cooled so I managed to force some down, it tasted of salt and hay. Then Jesamy came out to find me. She had the bottle of dettol in her hand, a bit of Ash's blood on her wrist, and as she took a step closer to me the marble in my head hit a groove right at the top of the brass bowl, and the sound it made was a horrible singing, like the last note of an opera just as everybody dies. It took forever and then the veranda railings were digging in under my ribs as I leaned over and heaved nothing into the bushes.



*Jesamy*

One day down at the sailing club I realised how easy it would be to lose Ash entirely. But when it started happening it was too soon and I wasn't ready yet. My plan involved a slow unravelling, for my sake more than his, and she would have taken him faster than I was ready for.

She was there at the club with three men, down from the airbase in the west. Something to do with the regatta. They were all older than us, on a first tour. Not soldiers, something more civilian. Medics probably. The island had had more of an impact on them than on us, more so even than Ash, with his black hair and olive skin. They had tans that had creased into lines around their eyes, sunglasses printed in white over the bridges of their noses. Dry lips and red eyes. Ghost flipflops between their toes. Muscular calves and blonde hairs on their arms. I looked at them as they milled around their boat, hosing the sails down, and their shoulders peeled in red and pink patchwork. In her bikini she was stocky but slim, the kind of body that did things well enough to keep up with the guys. The kind of girl that asked for help and was part of everything. Popular. I wondered what that felt like.

She noticed Ash immediately. Seeing him seen – just filling his bottle at the water fountain, pausing to pick a burr out of his foot, putting his sunglasses on – I realized how very beautiful he was, and how that was going to a problem.

He was drawn in to them quickly, method unknown, and then they were all five talking and laughing and squinting up at the sails together. I watched from the shade on the wall for a few minutes, trying to listen against the breeze: 'rot in a few months', '5 knots', 'Casiss marina', other things. Bursts of laughter. I wasn't listening for that, but heard the moment when she put her hand on his arm and pointed straight out to sea to trace a pattern on the blue. He smiled at her in a way that I knew would go straight into her – vulnerable, arrogant – and that's when I got up from the wall. As I walked towards them I walked fully into as much as I could be: cold and long and more beautiful than her without even trying. I took my top off, letting my hair spill over my bikini down to my waist, and they all turned to watch.

'Nice boat,' I said, and touched the polished wooden flank of it. I didn't listen to what they said back to me or the way they lifted my hair with their eyes and licked me all over. I smiled at her

and thought of biting her brown shoulders leaving the flesh torn and bleeding, just snicking bone with my teeth. She understood immediately and that's when I spat her out and left her to him.

He followed me. I saw his shadow overtake my feet and he raced me to the sun-loungers. He slung himself onto one and rested an arm over his eyes.

'Point taken'.

I looked over at him and he was laughing. I picked up my sunscreen and shook it. The cap was loose and cream fell out in blue blobs, over his chest and St. Christopher and a little on his headphones. He looked at it for a second and then lurched out of his lounge to grab me. In the second whilst I was being swung through the air onto his shoulder I looked over at the boat and all four of them were watching.

*Jakey*

The first time I saw the boy with the wishbone tattoo was at the club, and he popped up out of nowhere like the regiment kids always do, sitting the opposite side of the bar whilst Mr. Panny grilled halloumi salad sandwiches for Ash and Jesamy. He was having a can of coke, and all I could see was this dark blue wishbone shaded onto the white underside of his arm. His wrists were broad, but skinny, and the bone stuck up like he was something fragile. I wasn't even looking at him, I was looking at the tattoo, but I could feel him noticing me, so I just went bright red like a dickhead and turned to where Ash and Jesamy were, like 'what was that you just said? Be there in a sec'. They were right down by the sun-loungers and couldn't even see me, but I legged it over to them, leaving my can of fanta on the counter along with about 80 cents.

When I got down to them Ash was pitching a fit that she'd covered him in factor 50 and it'd got all over his headphones. He got off his lounge, rugby-tackled Jesamy round the waist and hefted her into this fireman's lift with her arse in her bikini bouncing away over his shoulder. She was screaming and kicking her legs, but like she loved it really. He carried her right over the rocky bit and down into the cove, and when it was deep enough, bent down and tipped her into the sea. She was laughing so hard that she was spitting water everywhere and her hair was in her mouth. Ash was just standing there trying to look stern but I know he was laughing too. I picked up the headphones – which weren't even too bad – and put them back on Ash's lounge. It sounds weird, but I felt a bit lonely then, even though they were just five metres away from me.

I looked up to the bar again, and Mr. Panny was waving to say that the sandwiches were ready. The guy was nowhere to be seen, but my fanta and 80 cents were still on the counter. As I paid, I asked Mr. Panny if he'd seen that boy around before. He just shrugged and said, 'maybe regiment?' but like he couldn't give a shit which white kid was buying sandwiches from him and leaving their money lying around as if it meant nothing.

The sandwiches were cold before Ash and Jesamy got out of the sea. She was doing handstands underwater and he was holding her feet steady. The whole afternoon I sat on my lounge under the giant fig tree and thought about nothing but that wishbone tattoo. Then honestly, then and only then did I realise that I knew that kid already. It was Benny.

His Dad was clearly doing a second tour. Which was shit, because I'd hoped we would've moved by then. Back in primary school and Year 7 Benny was my best friend. They called us Ben and Jerry, which was lame, but it was better than the alternatives. He was really thin, and had braces which I was jealous of until I saw how ill he got whenever they tightened them up. He was pale and clever, with nearly white hair, and would've been a massive geek and we would've been bullied for sure, but if anyone went near him he had these zingers, like really nasty things to say about people, so we had immunity for a bit. Life was pretty good having a friend. I needed one. Jesamy got moved up to Ash's year almost the minute she started high school, so they were this team where no one looked straight at them. Anytime anyone new came in, they just burned right through them. Jesamy stared at them like who the fuck are you I don't care and Ash was hot and good at stuff and generally just really alpha so they were as close as anyone got to being untouchable. Down on the farm with everyone else you either had to fend for yourself which is hard when you're a suspected gayboy, or you got someone to watch your back. So I had Benny.

But then in Year 7 he told me that his dad was being posted. So I had to do the Strategy. The Strategy is a thing that everyone does if they're about to be left behind. It's always easier to be the one to leave, because it's bye bye, cry cry, new school, new drama, get your head in gear, keep up. The Headteachers of the schools do a thing at the beginning of term to all the new kids where they basically say 'forget everything about your last school, don't talk about it or think about it, and eventually you'll fit in.' And you generally do. But being left behind is shit. You get left in this vacuum where no-one wants to be your friend because you're vulnerable. Or because you got comfortable in your friendship and forgot how to be popular. So the Strategy means you work out how long they've got left, say three months. You do Pre-Mourn, where you obsessively cry and get fucked up about them leaving for the first two months. You both get really into it, like doing blood-brothers and shitty tattoos (mine and Benny's was an ice cream cone which was nice, but cutting that into my foot then putting biro ink in it was fucking painful. It got infected in about two days and we both had to go to the med-station and get them picked out – but at least it scarred so that's something) and friendship bracelets if you're girls, which we both kind of were. That's the nice bit.

Then the next stage is awful. A weird thing happens where you pick a fight, over something stupid, and then you really get into the argument, and it gets bigger and you realise that you hate literally everything about them. It gets nasty, especially when your opponent is someone like Benny who's a vicious fuck. So then you stop talking. There's a scary day or two where everyone in your class still thinks you're friends, so they leave you alone and you're so lonely you want to die. Then the vultures come in. The gossip starts, like what happened, what did they do. And the person that leaves is the weak one, because he's a traitor, and going away and secretly everyone wants to leave. So then they start bullying him. They get into it, and because he's worn down with the arguments, his zingers aren't as good as normal. And you join in, because honestly, he's so lame, and skinny and he smells really strongly of milk, which makes you sick.

By the time term ends, you're almost popular. You've joined in with the bullies, so they start calling you Jakey not Jerry. You've got people watching your back. And you get called into the Headteacher's office for bullying, which is massively cool to everyone else, and secretly hard standing there in front of Benny's mum who made you a cushion for your birthday. Then he leaves, and on the last day when you sign his shirt you want to cry and feel so guilty at the wasted time, but he looks at you with those dog-eyes and you get angry at him for being so weak, and touching him is disgusting, and you also want to hug him. It's pretty confusing.

Then after that you're on your own and the whole time you're just trying to keep your head above water. But it only takes a few weeks for it to just be like, Benny who?

The one thing that cannot happen is a second tour. The Strategy is designed for you to never see that person again. It's not as if you can just apologise for breaking someone's heart.

Especially not when they come back looking like that, and Jesus, what a difference two years makes.



*Jakey*

The first thing I knew about the explosion was waking up sweating for maybe a minute, but the aircon sometimes clicked off in the night so I chucked my sheet back and went back to sleep. It was light, but not light enough for it to be daytime. Then Stephen was in the room telling us to get OUT, go downstairs, don't stop, don't get anything, just go straight to the car. Jesamy ran out to the landing putting her shorts on and Ash had his hand on her shoulder and was pushing her down the stairs. Malina grabbed my hand and we ran down and pegged it to the car where Stephen had already started the engine. There were sirens coming from the direction of the beach. When we got to the main road it was mental, everyone was on the street, there were cars all the way up the hill even though there was usually never anyone really driving on the garrison, and there were soldiers barging into houses getting everyone out. I saw Mr Tudor without a shirt on, and loads of teachers and dentists and everyone looking like they'd just got out of bed. There were jeeps everywhere filled with people that we knew. The speed-limit didn't seem like a thing anymore, we were all just going as fast as the cars would go, and heading up to North. At the top there were still guards on the gate but the barriers were up and as we left camp there were tanks parked on the road leading to the coast so that we couldn't go back down. The way was basically marked by tanks and soldiers blocking off any road apart from the one leading inland. No-one in the cars were talking, it was just like, get out of here. Stephen had a radio thing clipped to his shirt that I'd never seen before, and I have to say, I was impressed. It was crackling at him and mainly he ignored it but sometimes he replied with a number and said where we were. The place we were going to was a huge big carpark thing above the firing ranges and khaki-coloured coaches were pulling onto it as we arrived. The people in the jeeps had to get out and onto the coaches. As soon as we parked, Stephen got us onto the coach then went off with some other men from work in a jeep. We set off a minute later. A soldier gave everyone a bottle of water out of a box and, weirdly, a bar of Galaxy. The driver was another soldier and he was going way too fast but he seemed like he knew what he was doing. A kid was crying a few rows behind me, but it was all so strange that even though I knew it was a boy in Year 3 I couldn't think of what he was called. We went on the west road then someone said that they bet we were going to the airbase on the other side of the island.

After that, more people started chatting and trying to ask the soldier what we were doing, but he was looking out of the window like he knew what was going to happen and then it happened.



*Ash*

With the first explosion you think the noise is coming from the coach engines, it's that kind of machine sound, a jet splitting in mid-air, a tank moving over rubble. Then the air turning grey behind the garrison, and that's your home, there, whipping your head round to look at it. The second explosion, now you're watching the right place, sounding just that split second after a square kilometre of the eastern seaboard hits the sky. Worse than before, bigger, taking the glass from the windows of the hotels and bits of billboards raining on the coach windscreen. No-one screaming to see it, or the metal suddenly in the road and bits of what look like black paper everywhere. And you're still moving, away, and there's a fog that wasn't there before. The reds of the fields, and sometimes grey, if the windows of the coach could open it would taste like gunfire or gasoline. Through it you can't see much, but there's a cloud hanging behind the garrison, black, and you know that means a fire that won't get put out for a while. Jesamy has that look on her face that you've only seen when she's sleepwalking down the stairs, feeling she's going to fall but can't help it. She's scratching the leather of her seat and you try to stop it because it's leaving marks and it's only PVC she'll rip right through in a minute. But she's on one, can't stop, and instead your hand gripping hers ends up scratching it too.

*Jesamy*

Earlier that morning, there had been a wildfire a few miles away. It moved quickly over the dry bush and pebbles. The wind was in the west and the fire jumped over the scrub and sucked the grass bare, split up the side of trees and the sap screamed before there was nothing left. The fire moved quicker than flight, birds were stuck black to branches. Later, they talked about birds trailing fire across the sky and no-one could figure out whether they were describing the speed of it, or whether the birds themselves were burning.

The fire got onto the local naval barracks like it knew where it was going, and took the firefighters on the outside of the munitions depot, just penned them in and ate them. It took the fire four seconds from impact to detonate the depot, no matter the high-pressure hoses and the nineteen people trying to stop it.

Ninety-eight containers of high explosive artillery shells, shell casings, compressed gunpowder, shotgun slugs and primers. Under a corrugated tin roof under the sun, more than two thousand tonnes of it. It went up and then it took the sky. It took the sky and then it spread out. Or maybe it spread out and then up, the people that were there to see it on impact died before they knew it, and it took the news stations half an hour to wake up and get the helicopters over the water. Either way it went hard four-hundred metres, across the road, and took the power-station, three of the chimneys and all of the generators. They managed to evacuate the power-station before the hit, but a guard died in hospital after a steel girder rammed through her car-windscreen.

After the explosions, fire again. Lots of them. Each one made of a flame tufting in the wind and touching grass. These fires spread out and took most of the fields. Scorching earth miles in each direction, further in the east, but by the time they reached the garrison there were soldiers behind the fire-break, spraying the gravel so that they wouldn't cross.

*Jakey*

We only knew that it hadn't been an air-strike when they split us up into ranks on the coaches – no-one forgot their place, even in pyjamas – and when we got to the airbase we were driven up to the Officer's Mess, which looked and smelled exactly the same as the one back home. We had to stay all in one room, with the one double bed and two cots. It was nine-ish when we got there, and for breakfast they served the usual, sausage and eggs, bowls of tinned grapefruit and prunes, toast on metal racks.

By eleven we were down by the pool on sunbeds under umbrellas. Some people were already by the bar getting drinks on tab. It was like the explosion had never happened, and we were on holiday, except with everyone we already knew. There was even a truck that pulled up with bags of clothes from the thrift shop, so we got to choose some things to wear whilst we were there. Jesamy found a leopard print swimming costume that was about three sizes too big, and some quite cool diamanté sunglasses, and a man's extra-large lumberjack shirt to have as a dress, and looked genuinely brilliant. I managed to get some kids swimming shorts that fit really well, but had Spiderman all over them, and a normal blue t-shirt. Obviously Ash got just black shorts and a white t-shirt that he didn't wear so he could wander around and flex his abs at everyone. I did spot a woman who looked like Benny's mum getting stuff out of the truck, but no sign of him. I supposed that someone as pale as him would need to be inside during the day, and I didn't know whether I was excited or dreading meeting him at some point.

Ash and Jesamy plunked themselves straight in the pool as soon as she'd covered herself in suncream she'd found in the baskets in the toilets. It was only one of those little Mess pools, oval-shaped and not really big enough for all the people's legs and arms to be in without brushing against each other. From the bright red of Jesamy's eyes and the smell of the compound, it was pretty high-chlorine, and I still had splinted fingers, so I decided against it unless it got too hot. It was like the Titanic survivors in the pool compound, mainly women and children. Most of the men were back home on the garrison doing whatever fit, useful-looking men did in emergencies. The only blokes left were the old civvies like Mr Tudor and the dentist and the vicar and a few other teachers that looked like they were a bit past dealing with logistics. I decided that because Ash

was messing about in the pool I'd be the man of the family for a bit and make us a base by the pool. I managed to claim a wooden sunbed and a fold-up chair from the pool-house, dragged them underneath an umbrella, then spread our room towels on them. The bar was giving out big bottles of water, so I got a few of them, and some crisps on tab and arranged these with Jesamy's suncream under the bed in the shade. I even headed inside and got a few books from the shelves inside, *Bridget Jones' Diary* and *Prisoner of Azkaban* and *The Secret History*.

Once Malina had got herself changed into a sundress and a broken straw hat from the thrift van, she sat on the chair with Bridget Jones. She barely got a chance to crack it though before Rob's wife Tina came along with towels and a toddler and a wriggling black dog, and plumped down onto the sunbed. She was in a nightie and a pair of men's khaki shorts.

'Alright Jakey?' she said to me, then looked around. 'Nice place you've got here. Have you any suncream? Thought I'd seen some round here somewhere.'

I leant under the sunbed and gave it to her. 'Here. It was in the shade so hopefully it hasn't separated.'

'Oh, thanks lovey. Was so busy finding madam some swimmers in the van I forgot to ask.' She started to lard the kid up with suncream, but dropped the dog lead and the dog went skittering off to the pool and started barking.

'Bugger!' she said and started laughing as the toddler tried to escape too.

'I'll get it' I said, and ran down to the pool steps, where the dog was crouched and dipping its feet in the water but not going in. I whistled to it, but it looked at me and started whining, like it wanted me to help it get in the pool.

'Come here' I said, but it ignored me and took a little leap into the water. I grabbed at the lead just before it landed in the deep end, and hauled it out on its harness. It wouldn't come back with me so I just hefted it over my shoulder and held on tight whilst it scabbled at my shoulders to go back to the water. When I got back to the umbrella Tina was forcing blow-up armbands onto the toddler's arms, and smiled at me as I stood there with the dog in my arms. He was relaxed now, and licking my arm in long strokes.

'Thanks love! He's a little shit-bag, isn't he. Looks like he's taken a shine to you though!'

I laughed, and noticed Malina was smiling at us as well. 'What's his name?' I asked.

'Well,' she spoke through a mouthful of armband that she was blowing up, 'he was Benson, after my dad's favourites – oh, shine *on*'. The armband had deflated again, and to my surprise Malina held her hand out for the armband, then started blowing it up for her.

'Cheers! Yeah, he was Benson, but then Maisie here,' and she pointed to the little girl, 'got it into her head that he was called Black Beauty, which was the most simpering pathetic bloody name I'd ever heard, but it stuck, and now he'll only answer to that.'

'Black Beauty,' I whispered to the dog, and he squirmed up so he could lick me on the mouth.

'Well. It's settled! He's yours now!' And she laughed, but it seemed like she meant it, because Maisie was tugging on her arm and she got up and headed over to the pool with her, still trying to wrestle the other armband on. 'Feel free to take him a spin around,' she shouted over her shoulder to me.

I looked at Malina, and she smiled and just shrugged.

'Alright' I said, and slipped into the pair of men's size 10 sandals me and Ash were sharing. I decided to take Black Beauty away from the noisy and exciting pool compound, so we cut out through the palm trees and the sandy flowerbeds to the tennis courts out the back. As soon as we turned the corner of the Mess building, the shrieks and splashing sounds were shut off and the air was suddenly full of insects buzzing in the bushes. I let loose a deep breath that I hadn't known was in me, and Black Beauty did a big long wee against a eucalyptus. It was cooler on the tiled forecourt and the balconies above cast a bit of shade. I decided we were going to shuffle up and down the storm-drains, because the eucalyptus leaves smelled nice and were slippery for my feet and also if Black Beauty did a shit in there I wouldn't need to pick it up. We shuffled happily for ten minutes or so, then I decided to step back out into the sun to see if I could see which room was ours. There was a pillow on one of the chairs on the balcony because Jesamy had got a burnt bum sitting straight onto the metal slats. I was scanning the second-floor balconies for that pillow when I

noticed a pair of white legs on a balcony on the third-floor. I already knew who it would be, but took a few more steps back to confirm that it was actually him. He was wearing a black t-shirt and shorts, with his feet up on the railing. There was a book hiding his face but I knew he'd seen us because we were literally the only moving things between the tennis courts and the main road a few miles away. My heart was beating too fast and I'd need to get out of the sun soon. But I waited one minute more staring up at him, and when he lowered the book to turn the page, he moved his left hand very slightly. It might have looked like nothing, but I knew it was for me.

*Ash*

You're in the pool together, the normal stuff, handstands where you hold her slippery ankles just growing enough stubble to prickle, floating out in the deep end, ears at the line of water so you're deaf with her hair drifting over onto you. Then the next minute the Tina woman from up the hill plumps into the water in her nightie with a baby in an inflatable rubber ring. She might not be deliberately aiming for you, but she's there anyway butting your shoulder with the doughnut, chatting shit to the kid and the kid laughing and shrieking in your ear. It's just an irritant at first, an intrusion on the slow currents of water passing between Jesamy's hands and your back, but soon enough the baby takes on to Jesamy, with her bleached hair and red eyes. Still, nothing other than entertainment just then, a kid staring at a white rabbit. But you're both floating slightly further apart than before, and then Tina notices you both.

*Cool outfit* she says, and winks at Jesamy, who looks hot and ridiculous in her leopard-print swimsuit.

*Thanks*, doesn't seem bothered by the pair of them so close. *What did you wangle?*

*Nothing much left after these gannets had done their supermarket sweep*, nods to the others in the pool, *but I don't suppose I'd have found anything much to fit at any rate. It's a lie you know, you don't bounce back.* Laughs. *I'll just have to wash my knickers in the sink of an evening.*

You turn away disgusted and that makes her laugh more. *Sorry Ash. Women's talk.*

And for some reason Jesamy doesn't turn with you but treads water at the side of the ring.

*Hop aboard* Tina says, and Jesamy rests her arms on the ring next to Tina's so they're face-to-face over the baby. They look ridiculous together, Jesmay's long white arms next to the plump freckly ones spreading out over the rubber, they look like they might even have cellulite underneath.

*She's taken a right shine to you*, Tina says nodding at the baby who is still staring up into Jesamy's face. *Never seen anything like it.*

*No?* Jesamy says, staring seriously back at the kid.

*No. She's more at home with dogs and ants and dungbeetles and the like.*

*I don't know whether to be flattered or not* Jesamy says, then sneezes suddenly and the baby jumps and starts laughing like it's never seen anything so funny. Tina snorts, then the three of them are laughing, shaking the rubber ring about.

Tina pulls a face and says *oh buggeration, I need a tiddle now. I'm on a bloody hair-trigger these days. Would you stay with her whilst I bob to the loo?*

*Of course*, then it's just the two of them floating together, and you see it happen before she knows it, that place in her reserved just for you crumpling.



*Jesamy*

When Tina got out of the pool leaving me and the baby together I was overwhelmed with something that I hadn't felt before, and I had to paddle us to the shallow end so that I could stand with my feet on the tile. It was a weirdly pleasurable crushing feeling in my chest. Not painful, more like leaves being squeezed in a fist leaving them bruised and soft and more easily torn. It was then that I realised I didn't know her name. I liked her though, liked her kicking me gently in the ribs, and her damp ginger curls, and her fearlessness. Some part of me was speaking quietly across a vast space, addressing the ridiculousness of admiring a nameless child I'd never met before, and telling me that she wasn't even properly real yet, not someone I could get to know. The same voice was saying that I didn't even like kids, that they were noisy and kind of pointless and belonged in special corrals until they were nurtured into a sensible age and capable of holding a conversation. It was reminding me that my own mother was only a teenager when she gave birth to Ash, and look at how that had turned out.

None of that seemed to apply, though, as I let my feet up from the tile again and we floated through the other bodies. Already I was on high alert for splashes and bumps to the baby, and I didn't rejoin Ash in the deep end, because he wasn't the right person for this situation. I had never knowingly felt maternal before and wondered if everyone could see it on me like a stain.

When Tina got back from the loo she asked me if I wanted to come with them to the bar for some chips and I actually said yes and got out of the pool to lift the baby out of her rubber ring. I felt Ash turn to watch us go, but still he stayed in the deep end and I was glad.

'What's her name?' I said.

Tina smiled at me as she took the baby from my arms. 'This is my Maisie. Are we going to walk, Moo?'

The baby made a sound that sounded like 'yes' as Tina set her down, and I felt the breath catch in my throat. I had no idea how old she was, and, for that matter, what age babies started to walk and talk, but it all seemed incredibly advanced to me. Maisie toddled between us holding Tina's hand, and then took mine. For a second it felt wrong to be touched by someone other than my brothers,

and I automatically tried to wriggle my hand out of her chubby grasp. She was oblivious to that so I relaxed and felt the sweat build between my palm and hers and yet I wasn't disgusted. People even smiled at me, and I wondered whether motherhood wasn't all as shameful as I'd imagined. The idea that you could grow another person inside you had seemed as intrusive and traumatic as the idea of having sex, and I'd thought that a child would feel like a constant reminder of that. But here was this funny kid, clever and capable, who gave as much as she needed to take. It was all a bit too much, a bit too new, a whole landscape of emotion that I had never imagined traversing.

Feeling raw and disconnected from my known life, I was glad when Tina took Maisie off for a nap after lunch. I laid down on the sunbed and picked up a copy of Harry Potter that was on the floor, distracting myself with that until Jakey reappeared with a panting black dog. It flumped down in the shade and Jakey reached under the sunbed for some water.

'Pour some of this in my hands will you?' he asked, looking up at me with his palms cupped tightly together.

'Yeah sure', and I swung my legs over the bed to pour the water. The dog went straight for stream from the bottle's rim, ignoring the pool in Jakey's hands.

'Urgh, gross. Don't drink it like that!' he said.

I capped the bottle and put it at the end of the bed whilst the dog figured out how to drink out of Jakey's hands. Then when it was done it scabbled to get under my bed. I could feel it panting through the towel, and the heat radiating off it. At that point Ash came over to us, shaking the water out of his hair. He grabbed up the bottle at the end of the sunbed and took a long swig of the water before either of us could stop him. Jakey yelped and I laughed at him as Jakey said 'don't! It's Black Beauty's! He licked it!'

He looked at us bemused, swallowed, and said 'who the fuck is Black Beauty?'

At these mentions of his name, the dog poked his head out from underneath the towel I was lying on.

'Are you joking?' Ash said, and when I continued to laugh, he hawked and spat in the bushes.

For the next hour or so, the dog and the boys kept me away from probing thoughts about bodies and motherhood and love. It was a relief to slot back into the place between my brothers that I'd briefly left behind, even if I no longer fitted so perfectly into it anymore. But still, when Tina brought Maisie down again after her nap, there was something in me when I saw her, potbellied and toddling towards me, that responded immediately with something almost like delight.

*Jakey*

Our team expanded by Black Beauty and Maisie and Tina. It was much comfier like that, and even Malina seemed less awkward when we were all together. We were good at passing the baby and the dog between us so that someone was free for a swim or chips or a wee or a sleep. I liked it. We had no stuff apart from freebies and what was on tab, so it was a bit like being on a camping trip or in a war. If someone needed something, I could find it. There was a clear goal, which was to look after each other. That was the kind of world that I was happy being in. It occurred to me that I would make a good wife, like an olden-days one who cooked things from scratch. I made up my mind then and there that that was what I wanted to be when I grew up.

In the early afternoon Jesamy and the baby went to hang out at the swings and Ash and Black Beauty lunged at each other, and Tina and Malina sat together and talked in low voices, things about the explosion and what Rob was doing and if we were going to be able to go home again. I didn't want to know. I could tell from their murmuring that it wasn't meant for me, and there'd be time for that later. There'd be time for everything later, to hear about the nineteen dead firefighters and the dead guard and the land gone black. We were on pause for the moment though, and that was fine with me.

I had a towel to sit on and a tree to lean on, and the sound of splashing and laughing from the pool helped me to unfocus my mind and dream. In the darkness behind my eyelids I got an image of a house with a door in the middle and two windows either side. It would have a big kitchen with a wooden table and a fireplace and a dog asleep on a cushion. I would make cakes at that table with my daughters and the baby would watch from his basket. There would probably have to be a woman to make the babies, but when the front door of the house opened, it would always be a man standing there, in a scarf smelling of fresh air and him. He had olive skin and curly black hair and clean fingernails and wore woollen suits when he went to work. When he smiled at me his teeth were so white and his lips were soft on my cheek. He was kind and gentle, and at night his body was a cave for me to curl up in and sleep.

*Jesamy*

Mr Tudor got stuck straight into life on tab, parking himself on the last bar stool half in and half out of the shade. He stayed there throughout the day with a paperback and lager refills.

As I went up to the bar to get the dog a bowl for water he swivelled around on his stool to face me, wearing a horrible pair of flowered swimming trunks and a white linen shirt with a stained collar.

'Jasmine! What are you having? This fella's amazing, he'll do anything you fancy.'

The bartender looked at me, raised his eyebrows, and I smiled at him.

'Just a bowl please, and some tap. For the dog.'

'Make it a double!' Mr Tudor said, 'and another one of these fine ales.' He drained his glass, and put it down none too gently on the bar.

'You do realise that you're gonna have to pay that back?' I said to him.

He shook his head. 'Ah now. You know what they say. All's free in love and war.'

'I'm sure they do, sir.'

The bartender put a metal bowl down on the bar and filled it with water from one of the soda guns.

Mr Tudor nodded at the bowl. 'Five-star service, even for the hounds! I'll come here again if you don't mind young man.'

The bartender did a tight smile. 'Anything else?'

'No thanks' and I picked up the bowl, 'cheers for this.'

'You're welcome' Mr Tudor said.

'Look after yourself?' I asked him, and he lifted a fresh pint up to me.

'Always.'

I decided to check back up on him later, but somehow, playing with Maisie, I forgot all about him. Just as some of the stinging heat left the day and a few people were packing up to get ready for dinner, he staggered through the sun-loungers, kicking drinks over and tripping slightly on the flags. He stood at the edge of the pool and smiled stupidly at the water.

'What have we here?' he announced to those of us watching, 'time for a dip.' He started unbuttoning his shirt and gave up halfway through and ended up wrenching it over his head. It happened really quickly. As his face was covered by the material he twisted and lost his footing. He half-fell down onto the first step then collapsed into the water, arms flailing and his shirt still over his face. He was barely under a second before he was hauled out by a cluster of people both in and out of the pool. He was spluttering and red and laughing, as were some of the people helping him up the steps. Supported between two people he was led across the pool compound dripping and talking to himself. One was the dentist, and the other, I was surprised to see, was Malina. The three of them went into the Mess via the patio doors, tracking wet footprints into the carpets, and were swallowed by the darkness inside.

Jakey had woken up from the noise, and looked at me. 'What happened?'

'Jesus.' Ash said.

'There but for the grace of God' said Tina, and I nodded, although I wasn't completely sure what she meant.

After that, there wasn't much else to do but to get our things together and go up to our rooms to get showered for dinner.

*Jakey*

Dinner was weird, partially because I was jetlagged from falling asleep outside, but also because the Mess dining room was always a shirt and tie kind of place and we were all in our thrift-shop fancy dress still, with flip-flops and pyjamas thrown into the mix. Ash was wearing the sandals, so I was barefoot, and I was pretty sure that Jesamy didn't have anything else on underneath her lumberjack shirt. That was a strange thought. How many people in that room were commando. I expected us to be shunted outside to the bar and patio, but the tables were all laid inside with white cloths and glasses. So in the end we took our seats underneath oil paintings and walls filled with plaques and photographs. The carpet was nice and plushy between my toes.

Malina hadn't been in the room when we'd gone up, so it was just the three of us sitting on a round table that seated eight. The same thing was happening that always did with Ash and Jesamy, where people stayed away from them and found seats somewhere else first. It obviously didn't work on Tina though, because when she breezed down the stairs late with Maisie clinging round her neck, she made a beeline straight for our table.

'Popular, aren't you?' she laughed, and lifted Maisie onto the seat next to her. Jesamy immediately swapped with Ash so that she could sit next to the baby, so then it went Tina, Maisie, Jesamy, Ash, and then me.

'Should we get a high-chair for her?' I said, because Maisie's head barely peeped above the tablecloth.

'Oh, she'll be reet. Wouldn't sit in a high-chair if you paid her. Ends up a prison-break and it's more trouble than it's worth.' Tina replied. 'Anyway, we've room. It's just us lot for tea tonight. Your mum and Black Beauty are minding Mr Tudor.'

Jesamy looked from Maisie. 'Is he ok?'

'Of course he is. And if he's not, your mum'll know what to do with him.'

I wondered how Tina knew that. But then two people walked into the dining room and the air was squeezed out of my lungs. Benny and his mum. They stood on the edge of the room for a bit, and looked out at the tables which were full of people all talking and laughing. Full, because no one

had wanted to sit on the table with us. Tina looked up, caught the eye of Benny's mum, and that was that, she gestured to the empty seats between us. Benny immediately turned around and looked like he was about to head up to their room again, but his mum put a hand on his arm and dragged him forwards. She walked over to us determinedly, and she'd always reminded me of a strong little dog. A Chihuahua or something that didn't give up. The last time I'd seen her she'd been crying on the low chair in the headmaster's office whilst I stood there not able to believe what I'd done.

She pulled up the chair next to Tina.

'I'm Louise, and this is Ben' she said to her.

Benny sat on the chair next to his mum without saying anything. When I could sneak a look at him, he was totally different to how I remembered. Skinnier even than me, with these purple acne scars all up his cheeks like a beard and a couple of spots reddish and angry near his chin. It sounds bad but there was one ripe one with a tiny pinprick of custard right on top and I just wanted to squeeze it. His hair was so dark it was almost blue, with tiny tiny purple stains just on his hairline.

He turned at one point and caught me staring. I went bright red. There was only one seat left between us so we were too close to ignore each other but too far to talk privately. When the table got a bit louder again, with Louise and Tina exchanging information and Jesamy and Maisie chatting shit to each other, I tried to think of something to say and got a clue from his Papa Roach t-shirt.

'Did you get that from the thrift-van?'

He glared at me. 'Why. Does it look like it?'

'No. I mean it's cool. I like it. I just didn't. I dunno.'

'Right.'

'Do you sleep in all black then?'



He sighed and ignored me like I was taking the piss out of him for being emo, but I wasn't. I was the one wearing spiderman trunks after all. It just seemed clever that's all, to wear normal clothes to bed in case of eventuality. This situation was proof that it was actually a smart idea.

We were silent then. Ash wasn't arsed talking to me, because bread rolls and butter had started doing the rounds, and he was sorting him and Jesamy out. I got a white roll and passed the basket to Benny. He passed it on to his mum without taking anything. I felt rude then, for having a roll, so I just picked at the little spiky bit on top, then pulled the whole thing open and rolled it into crumbs. There was nothing else to do apart from that and down glass after glass of water. It was hot in there, and started to smell of tomato soup. My heart started speeding up, then a bowl of soup was put in front of me and I couldn't stand it. The smell coming off it was bile-y and sharp. Jesamy was soaking bits of bread in it for Maisie and it was blood coloured and fleshy and too much. *Hangman*, my head said to me, and that was enough.

I got up from the table, staggering a bit as the chair leg caught on the carpet. 'I just need to-' I said. Jesamy looked up, but this time she had her hands full with a real baby.

'Be back in a bit,' I said, and weaved my way through the chairs and tables out to the entrance hall. My heartbeat was right up in my mouth and there were flashing lights at the edges of my eyes. The front doors were heavy but just before it was too late I got out, out into the air. It was hot and full, loud with cicadas and smelling of eucalyptus. I took a breath and another, then another. My legs were trembling too much to stand so I walked around the building, into the trees, out of the trees, over the flowerbeds to the pool, across the concrete and out again through the other flowerbeds to the front doors. I did this twice, then I was calm enough to go back inside. The entrance hall was full of smells, and I held my breath until I got upstairs.

*Jesamy*

Having a normal meal with friends and a lovely baby wasn't part of our lives, and I shouldn't have expected it to be. I wiped soup off Maisie's face, then gave my side plate full of bread bits to Tina.

'Sorry.'

Tina shifted a protesting Maisie onto her lap and smiled at me. 'What for, love?'

'You know', I flapped my hand at my seat, and she understood.

'Go get yourself a butty or something from the bar before you go.'

'Butter?'

She laughed at that. 'Butty. Sandwich. They'll knock you something up.'

'Ok. See you both tomorrow?' I pushed a curl back from getting stuck in Maisie's mouth. It was suddenly very important that I saw them tomorrow.

'You will.'

I could feel Benny and his mum watching our quiet conversation, and I left.

Ash leaned back as I passed him. 'Be up after mains.'

'Yeah.' I said. 'Eat.' and he nodded.

The bar was empty, and I closed my eyes to the murmur of cricket on the radio whilst I waited for my cheese toastie. When I skirted the edge of the dining room the noise of it was unbelievable, and it seemed strange that I had been part of that five minutes before. I ate my toastie standing looking at the photos in the hallway, so that it didn't freak Jakey out. Seventy years of group portraits, mainly men in regalia, and women in long dresses. I wondered how they didn't get bored of it all, same soup, same shirt, same wife, same life. It wasn't exactly an original thought, but I felt sure that that would never be me. As soon as I swallowed the last sharp corner of bread, I headed upstairs. The staircase was quiet, and the landing was quiet, and the room was quieter. The aircon was on, and Jakey was lumped against the headboard with pillows and blankets propping him up. I got onto the bed. 'Hey.'

'Hey.'

'What are you reading?'

He flipped the book over so I could see the cover. 'Harry Potter.'

'Where are we up to?'

'Boggart.'

'Ah, nice one. Can I join in?'

He shifted over so that I could get in the nest with him and I read slower and he read faster so that we could turn the pages at the same time. Ash joined us later and threw some Twixes on the bed.

'Budge up.'

We read together until Jakey fell asleep on my shoulder and I fell asleep on Ash's. Malina came in later, much later. I woke up when I felt the door open. It was dark, but there was a humidity in the room that meant that morning wasn't far off. She flopped onto one of the camp beds and I felt a surge of anxiety in case anyone talked, but then I remembered it was none of my business and went back to sleep.

*Jakey*

When I woke up it was early and the light was weak behind the curtain. I was bursting for a wee, but didn't want to disturb Ash and Jesamy who were sharing the pillow next to me. It was nice there, warm and close despite the air-conditioning. It was so selfish, because even then I knew that people had died, but with the three of us sleeping piled up like puppies, I was grateful for the power-station exploding. Even Malina in the cot bed was nice for once. What would life be like if Stephen never came back for us, and we woke up every morning here and went downstairs for breakfast and then over the road to the school? Just the three of us, and Malina being the quiet parent and nothing ever happening apart from playing with the dog and the baby? But even as I thought it I remembered that Ash and Jesamy had no more school left to go to. In September everyone in school would be one year older than they should be, and they'd be gone. The disappointment was so bad that I was sitting up before I knew what I was doing, and going to the bathroom down the corridor. The fluorescent lights buzzing overhead gave me an instant headache and I was sick of holding on and holding on, waiting for things to go wrong.

*Jesamy*

We stayed there almost a week, the days blurring into each other as nothing really seemed to change. Full English for those who could eat bacon and egg in a morning. A swim for those who couldn't. Chips from the bar, huge bottles of water, ice-creams in the afternoon, and formal meals in the dining room at night. Benny and Louise thankfully left on the second day to go and stay at a friend's house on the airbase, so the simmering currents of resentment or sexual tension between him and Jakey were able to subside along with his anxiety. At night, someone would choose a DVD and we'd sit en masse in front of the gigantic TV in the common room and watch a series of noisy action films. We swapped the paperbacks between us, with the pages becoming more pool-swollen by the day. Maisie, Tina and Black Beauty suddenly became a part of our family with all the chaos that the baby and the dog could create, and a weird kind of happy exhaustion amongst those of us who looked after them. I'd got used to the deep smell of chlorine in my hair and skin, so sharp that even when I covered myself in body-lotion from the baskets in the bathroom it was always there. Some do-gooders from the airbase church had bought packs of underwear for us, and there had been another clothing drive-by, this time enhanced by uniform stores and the base's various clubs. We now had between us t-shirts from Kestrals Kite-surfing, Western Base Area Am-Drammers, the sailing club, the Military Wives Choir, and Swordfish Swimming Club, which all three of us refused to wear on point of principle, since they were our main rivals at the military schools gala.

One by one the more useful of the men trickled back to the garrison to help in the recovery. Mr Tudor remained, sitting at his barstool during the days, but increasingly being pulled into our orbit, sitting next to Malina on the pool-chair or joining our table at night. Sometimes he even made her laugh, and I held my breath in case people saw.

We watched the explosion out on the TV, again and again, images taken from fishing boats in the bay and grainy mobile phone footage from tower-blocks in Half Moon that had screaming in the background. The news station told us some of what we already knew, and more than we wanted to. Twenty dead, and barely enough to identify the firefighters other than their names on the rotas. State funerals for all of them, empty coffins in a processional through Half Moon. The

trriage of disaster had prioritised all generators for the hospitals, but still most of the patients were transferred west. Everything and everyone else would have to muddle through with rolling black-outs and only a few hours each day to boil water or use the phone. The airport on the east side of the island had closed with flights re-routed to the airport in the west. Hotels without generators were falling apart, and tourists were flooding home as fast as flights could be rebooked. It could have been worse in some ways; only one third of the island was without steady power, and the mainland was chipping in with regards to fuelling the generators, but overall the picture wasn't great for the islanders. Meanwhile, we still kept running the aircon at night, watching the TV, switching the lights on in any room we wanted, and having cold drinks and ice-cream by the pool, which remained as clean and turquoise as it had been when we'd arrived.

On our last night there, not that we'd known it then, I couldn't sleep. Next to me in the double bed, Jakey snuffled quietly, and over in one of the cot-beds Ash had his arm over his eyes. Malina's cot was empty, as it often was until the early hours. I slipped out of the room. Downstairs was empty although fans still whirred overhead, and the pool was a bright turquoise egg, lit up pointlessly in the dark. I started walking the perimeter of the Mess. It was too high up on the cliffs for us to be able to reach the sea without walking on the road for several miles, and I missed the sound and smell of it. I began to thread my way through the scrubland, following rabbit or sheep paths, until I reached a small wood. It was a relief for my bare feet to be walking on eucalyptus leaves instead of the burr-strewn rocks. It was dark and still in there, and I heard a faint sound that seemed familiar. Ahead of me, almost invisible in the dark, were two people speaking quietly, and one of them was crying. The other responded soothingly, and, not wanting to intrude, I crept backwards out of the trees. It was Malina, of course. And I couldn't have been certain, but I had the feeling the other person was Mr Tudor. Walking in on them talking like that seemed more intimate than catching them kissing or touching. More dangerous, as well. I wanted to feel angry with her for putting us at risk of gossip or worse, but I only felt relieved that she had someone to listen to her whilst she cried.

I laid down on one of the sun-beds by the pool, hoping to hear Malina coming back out of the woods and into the Mess, but must have finally fallen asleep. When I got back to the room she

was in her cot, apparently asleep. Jakey was still curled up in the double bed but Ash wasn't there. The curtains were slightly open and so I quietly crossed the room and slid the door back to the balcony. He was having a fag, leaning over the railing like he was on a ship. He turned when he heard the metal scrape of the door.

He raised his eyebrows at me and I nodded and joined him at the railing.

'Where'd you get that from?' I said.

'Barman tabbed me a few.'

'Oh, right.'

Eastwards towards home there was orange light coming up over the land. I breathed in the smoke from Ash's lungs and watched for whatever was going to happen next.

*Ash*

Stephen pulls up onto the car park as the sky reaches light, engine noisy against the walls of the Mess. In the room Jesamy is getting her leopard-print costume on again for another day of knocking about round the pool with Maisie and the dog. Jakey's reading in bed and Malina's coming back round to herself after whatever she was up to last night. But he's here now and it'll all change again. He'll tell you the garrison's over and you're leaving island tonight. Or you're moving down this end, or whatever else, it doesn't matter to you now. Stay quiet on the balcony smoking as he gets out of the jeep with his shirt and boots clean and he walks right under the balconies without noticing you. Give it a half a minute, smoke the fag down to the end, then stub it out on the railing and flick it overboard.



*Jesamy*

When the knock on the door came, stupidly for a second I thought it was room-service. But then he walked in and I held my Kestrals Kite-surfing t-shirt against me as if he were a man and not my father. I scanned the room to see if there were any sign of anything to give us away, but there was nothing to give. We hadn't done anything apart from exist without him. He frowned to see Jakey in the double bed, then looked to Malina dressed already and frozen to see him.

'Good news!' he said. 'I've come to take you home.'

Ash slid back the balcony door and came in to stand beside me, smelling faintly of smoke.

Stephen nodded hello at him. 'There's still clear-up going on, but it's safe for civilians now.'

'So we're going, now?' Jakey said quietly.

Stephen looked around at the room. 'Yup. Good job there's nothing to pack, ha!' He clapped loudly, once, as if to applaud himself.

I cleared my throat. 'The garrison's ok then?' That was something at least. The bougainvillea and the woods and our coves all safe. It had to be something.

'It is indeed.' He looked at me holding the t-shirt. 'I'll let you get dressed. Come down when you're ready. Don't take long. Malina, shall we see if we can scare up some breakfast?'

She was still standing there stunned, but shook her head and followed him. Before she closed the door behind her she gave me a quick, hard look, but I didn't know what she meant by it.

Once we'd balled our pyjamas up we headed downstairs with the books we'd borrowed and returned them to the bookshelves in the lounge. If we were allowed to go, I had expected downstairs to be full of people having breakfast and getting ready to leave, but there was just a guy in shorts and a cloth hat watering the plants around the pool and a woman putting the umbrellas up on the patio. We looked into the bar which was empty and, when we went onto the forecourt, Malina and Stephen were already at the jeep. They got in when we approached, and on the backseat there were three bottles of water, three bananas and three cereal bars. Breakfast.

'Thought we'd get a jump start on the motorway before rush hour sets in.' Stephen said as he started the engine.

I turned to look back at the Mess as we pulled onto the main road. The whitewash was pale yellow in the light, and there were deep shadows over the balconies.

'What time is everyone else coming back?' I said to Stephen. 'Are the coaches coming for them?'

'Not sure yet.' He replied. 'Might not be back for a week or so.'

'What?' It came out louder than I expected. For Maisie, and Black Beauty, Tina. Even Mr Tudor, drunk as he was. A community of sorts, maybe my first one. I didn't want to leave them. He frowned at me in the rear-view mirror. 'Most of the houses aren't safe yet.'

'But ours is?'

'Not completely, but it won't be long. There's just a bit of clearing up to finish.'

'How come we're going back though, shouldn't we have waited down here until it's finished?'

To my right, Jakey very slightly shook his head at me.

'Am I missing something here?' Stephen asked, but looked over at Malina not me. 'Is there a reason you don't you want to go home?' He'd gone silky, and dangerous was next.

'No,' I said, and left it at that.

'Right,' Stephen said, and nodded to himself.

In the quiet left behind, Ash opened his cereal bar. He elbowed me.

'Chocolate. Want some?'

I nodded and he bit half of it off and handed the rest of it to me. It was dry and sweet and it took a long time to chew.

I fell asleep, helplessly, on Ash's shoulder as soon as we got onto the motorway, and it wasn't until we stopped at McDonalds on the outskirts of Half Moon that I woke up. Jakey got out for a wee,

and brought us back a milkshake to share with three straws that gummed up with banana ice-cream.

The shock began as we got back on the coast road. I looked east to the power-station as I always did, and there was nothing there to hold onto apart from one chimney, the red and white stripes barely showing through black ashdust. The other three chimneys were just their own ghosts as I saw them and then didn't see them the more I looked. That part of the seaboard was an empty socket where a tooth had been, and that was when I felt things slipping apart.

As we drove onto the garrison, there were soldiers milling about in front of the wire, lining up two by two at the gate, and another four extra at the guard's hut. There were no local guards to be seen, just machine guns and camo. Because we were in the jeep, Stephen didn't have to show ID, the soldiers waved him through after peering in at us in the backseat. As we passed the hut Ash elbowed me: 'look at that', and when I looked over at where he was pointing I saw that there was a new addition to the chalkboard:

*Out of Bounds to all Personnel – BUFFER ZONE/LINE (permanent), 3 HORSESHOES  
PUB (permanent), THE SEA (until further notice).*

Inside the garrison nothing had changed apart from the shattered windows. As we curved around the outside of the villages we could see the glass sparkling on the scrub outside the houses, and everywhere there were men – soldiers, gardeners, police, guards, the caretakers from the schools, guys from the bank – picking it all up.

'How long have they been at that?' Ash said, and Stephen looked at him in the rear view mirror.

'Started once the fires were contained. Began up at the Commander's and they've been working their way down through the villages almost a week. It's a massive operation.'

'Any new fires?'

'None yet. Been lucky with the weather so far. There'll be trouble when the sun comes out. They've not called an emergency, but if the heatwave comes in they might have to.'

I tried not to think of glass strewn like diamonds in the grasses and bushes outside our house. The windows facing onto the yard would be ok because it would have all blown onto flags or flowerbeds, but the back and the veranda faced north, and there was nothing between our house and HQ apart from miles of scrub. I saw tendrils of smoke curling up around shards of grass, overtaking the wind and eating every tree and bush on the garrison. And then I saw Jakey thinking the same thing too, and wrapped my fingers around his until we made one fist.

*Ash*

When you get to the house the cleaner's on the path wearing rubber gloves and picking glass out of the verges. Inside the yard another woman has gardening gloves on kneeling in the flowerbeds. *That's not essential for now* Stephen says to her, *focus more on the outside of the house, at the front*. She looks up at you unsure of what he's saying and he gestures her to walk through the house to the front veranda. The three of you go upstairs to look at the damage. Probably one in three windows have stayed in, like the skylights, but the balcony doors look like someone has kicked holes in them and huge edges of glass hang out of the bathroom windows ready to fall down onto the path. You look out of your balcony to the bush below and see Stephen with the woman, pointing to the fragments that lie all around the veranda. Sensing you, Stephen looks up and shouts *don't touch any of it! Keep your shoes on and don't touch it*.

You go in to find Jakey in his room and he's already holding one hand oddly in the other.

*What've you done now?*

Awkward and ready to cry. *Nothing. There was a piece on my bed and I tried to move it but it was really sharp and got me a bit*. He points at his pillow where a shard twenty centimetres long is lying.

*Jesus Christ.*

*I thought it looked like an icicle.*

*Give me your hand.*

The cut on his palm long and jagged but not deep, you hold it under the cold tap and shout out the door, *Jesamy, get some toilet roll*, and she's there moments later with a roll of pink paper in her hand.

*Stephen just shouted up at me for us to get out of the house for a while*. Spots Jakey.

*What's wrong?*

She comes over dabbing Jakey's palm dry, wrapping the toilet roll around it like a bandage.

*What the fuck?* she says, *what the fuck?*

*I know*

*No. What the fuck are we doing here? The house isn't 'finished' whatever that means. Why are we here and no one else is?*

She squeezes Jakey's hand and he winces.

*Calm down man.*

*Someone talked. I fucking bet they did. Whatever Malina was doing last night.*

You look out the open door. *Maybe. But shut up for now alright?*

She glares up at you.

*Come on, we can't do anything about it now. Let's just head out, before he sees this, and nod at Jakey's hand wadded up in pink.*

She snorts but walks out the door, pulling Jakey behind her. You grab some cans from the fridge and leave via the yard door, Malina out there making the cleaner take the rubber gloves off and put some gardening ones on. Normal service resumed none of you speak as you pass her, something about her not right again. As you're walking down the street in your stupid thrift store mufti you've not changed out of yet, the people picking glass deliberately don't look at you. There's a painful heat behind the clouds making everyone screw their eyes up against the light. You try not to look over at the right-hand side of the street where the school caretaker is picking glass with the bus-driver, wanting to hide your ice-tea so they can't see it, but you've already pierced a hole in the side of it for Jesamy so it would've spilled everywhere.

*Where we going?* says Jakey.

Jesamy silent and pissed off so you say *the usual?*

*But I thought we weren't allowed down there?*

*We're just having a look, there's no law against that.*

Start walking faster so that there's not enough room for Jesamy to start on fair and unfair and Maisie. That's one less thing to distract her now.

*Jesamy*

It turns out that we couldn't even get down the road to Petrol Bay. After we left the 16B gate, the whole road heading east was still blocked by tanks, and even Ash didn't want to risk it, so we went down through the woods to Fisherman's Cove.

The beach was deserted, with the whip of wind in the palms the only sound. The boats were pulled high up on the beach, the fishing huts shuttered and blank. The sky was low. The water rolled onto the pebbles like mercury. Everything stank of oil. There was no way they were letting anyone back.

We walked back the long way home, through Main and up the steps to the church. Without really talking about it, we headed through the school netball courts to the wall overlooking the valley. The pool was a grey-turquoise and looked like it had fished all the ash out of the air. There were men down there draining it even then, pouring the darker water back into tanker-trucks.

'Are they at least gonna be able to use it on the fields or whatever?' Jakey said.

We were quiet for a bit. 'I don't think so,' Ash said. 'There's too much chlorine in it. It'd kill the crops.'

'Shit.'

'Yeah.'

Going through the empty school buildings we crunched over a carpet of glass in our flipflops. We looked for slabs to stand on to feel that pop as it cracked underneath us, like thick ice on a puddle.

*Jakey*

I wished we hadn't gone back. Everything was trashed and dangerous. I hated there being men outside picking glass because I felt so guilty watching and not doing anything. Stephen was behaving like he cared about us all of a sudden and not letting us touch any of it, so we had to sit still whilst people with the same thickness of skin and same ability to bleed went around with big knives of glass in their hands. That was all I dreamt about that first night home, although I don't really remember the dreams. Just men and glass and no-one looking at me. It didn't help that we didn't have any windowpanes in the house and couldn't have the aircon on. It was weird sleeping with nothing between us and the outside, even though we would usually sleep with windows open. It was something about not being able to close them if we wanted to. When the glass-man came to replace them the next morning I was very happy to have something between me and the outside world, even if it was only half a centimetre thick and completely see-through.



*Jesamy*

The garrison was so oppressive with all the quiet glass-picking that we needed to get out the next day. The coast road had stayed closed from the 16B gate out to Petrol Bay, so we went into the woods behind Fisherman's Cove and walked through the eucalyptus following the smell of diesel fumes. The woods petered out along the cliff above the Officer's Club and we found a slab of sandstone in the shade to sit on. From there we could see the terracotta roofs of the Officer's club, the tennis courts still covered in a grey ash, the huts with their palm walls blasted to strings. And beyond it, the wide sweep of Petrol Bay backdropped by what was left of the power-station.

'Fucking hell', Jakey said, and I agreed without saying anything. Maybe it was the stillness of the day, or just the vantage we had, but the water was a turquoise postcard of itself. Too perfect a victim to have so many boats and barges crawling its surface. Too indifferent to the industrial litter of metal and concrete piled in the shallows. Spreading from the former sea-walls, the oil slick looked almost simple, like a spill of ink, but with just a shimmer of something else in it. There were no birds dipped in black, no beach full of flesh rotting into slime. Yet. But that might come in time. The oil was ring-fenced by a string of booms as insubstantial as the floats at the swimming pool.

'How are they supposed to hold the oil?' Jakey said. 'Won't it go under the booms?'

Ash frowned. 'They're supposed to absorb it. And besides, oil floats.'

'So?'

'Well, it can't swim under them.'

'Hm.' I said. 'Even so. It doesn't seem enough.'

Jakey looked at me, and I said quickly, 'don't worry. They'll deal with it soon. They can't let it wash up onto the tourist beaches.'

'What will they do though?'

'Um.' I didn't know. 'They'll probably suck it all up with a machine like a big straw.'

Ash was laughing and shaking his head at me.

'What?' I leaned back and slapped him.

'Ow. "A machine like a big straw?" Do you mean a skimmer?'

I just looked at him. 'Yes.'

He shook his head again, smiling, and lit a cigarette. 'No way.'

'What?'

'They'll not be spending more money on this than strictly necessary. They'll set it on fire or dump a load of Fairy Liquid on it.'

Jakey shifted next to me and I could feel his panic as if it were mine. Fire.

I elbowed Ash. 'Why are you being such an asshole?'

He gestured with his fag at the action in the bay. 'I'm not the asshole. How many of our guys do you see down there?'

We all three looked down. There was no camo, no military green and khaki. Nothing recognisable as an operation. 'So?'

'So they decided it's not our deal. Not our barracks, not our depot, not our mistake. Which it isn't. They're basically pointing the finger at whatever idiots left a munitions dump within spitting distance of a power-station. Which is why they've left it to a bunch of amateurs who have bigger things to worry about than a few dead fish or a bit of pollution.'

I couldn't quite grasp what he was saying. He looked at me and Jakey and he seemed much older than us suddenly. He sighed.

'They'll get rid of all the floating shit so it doesn't get into the shipping channels, salvage whatever they can, and get rid of the oil as cheaply as possible. But I doubt it'll be soon.'

We all sat silently for a few moments. Then Jakey said, 'so when will they open the beaches?'

Ash stayed silent, and my heart sank as I said it.

'Not for a while, probably.'

*Ash*

After Jesamy breaks the bad news to Jakey and herself, and you if you're being honest, you go get some lunch. Just inland from the bay there's a good grilled sandwich place so you start walking up through the scrub. The grill-house so close to the garrison that you can see soldiers on PT following the perimeter wire. Jesamy's got a sarong over her shoulders so they don't burn but the heat still drills through the green fabric. Thin cotton with a batik print of lizards crawling over her back. When she moves her shoulders they skitter up her neck and down the backs of her arms.

Getting closer you see that the scrub at the side of the grill-house isn't clogged up with trucks like it usually is. This means you'll get served soon because most of the time here you can wait half an hour watching the sweat falling off the chefs onto the grill and hoping it's not your meat being flipped into it. You take the dirt-road to the right and stop when you get to the clearing under the trees. No canopy up over the patio, no smell of fried meat, no shouting through the order hatch, no customers.

'Is it shut?' Jakey.

You look through the windows. Fridges off, grills empty.

'Yeah' you say.

Jesamy is wandering off behind the building.

'Where you going?'

'For a quick wee. Watch out for anyone.'

'Ok'. But there's no point because there's no-one here and no-one coming it looks like.

When's she's back she shrugs. 'Deserted.'

Then it comes to you. All the light switches in your house still working and the water cooler, and the ceiling fans and the cooker and bedside lamps. That's all generator, stupidly you didn't realise it til now. Somewhere at the top of camp there's engines burning oil to feed the aircons and for some reason you didn't think on it when you got back. But of course there's no power. There's no power the minute you step outside the 16B.

For a second your mind blows disaster-wide with the thought of hospitals, petrol-pumps, airports, reservoirs, supermarkets, freezers, banks and all the rest of it without power. Then you have to close it because it's too much to think about in front of Jesamy and Jakey. Too much to think about because you're just a kid who looks like a man but you don't know what to do about this. The only thing you can do right now is get out of here and back onto the garrison. You'll be leaving island soon and that seems the safest thing all round.

*Jesamy*

Around us, the garrison refilled itself slowly, coach by coach, rank by rank. Even so, I was still surprised when the summer ball still went ahead. It was held down at the Officer's Club, on the spit of land between Fisherman's Cove and Petrol Bay. We arrived when it was already underway, through the car windows I could hear trumpets behind a clash of plates and speech. When we got out the still air was thick with perfumes just on the turn, and salmon, and the released heat from the clay tennis courts.

As Stephen and Malina walked through the double-doors into the shade of the Officer's Club I hung back.

'What are you doing?' Jakey, excited for his first ball in that blue shirt and ironed shorts.

'I don't know. I just want to stay here for a second.'

'Fine by me.' Ash reached into his pocket and shook a fag out of the packet.

His shirt was blue too, but with a cigarette burn in the hem and rolled up over his biceps. We leaned together against the mesh fence of the tennis courts and looked out over the water. In the bay the oil spill was still visible with the glint of the sunset on it. Cranes and scaffolding were crosshatched over the corpse of the power-station and it all seemed so bizarre, to be having a party across the water from a disaster. I couldn't quite breathe, and there was that familiar tingling in my lips and fingers.

Ash smoked his fag down to the filter and pinched it out before dropping it onto the scrub.

'Shall we?'

'Are you kidding me? Pick it up!'

'It's out! And it's on rock!'

I just stared at him. Muttering something that sounded like 'fucking paranoid', he picked it up, put it in his pocket and then headed over to the club without looking back. Jakey started to follow him, then turned to me.

'They'll be serving dinner soon. Are you coming?'

The thought of prawn cocktail in warm mayonnaise made me feel suddenly ill. I shuddered in the heat and put my hands on my cheeks to cool them down. I was covered in goosepimples.

'Maybe in a bit. I'm just going to have a walk around for a while.'

I smiled thinly at his look of concern. 'I think my dress is a bit too tight.'

We both considered it for a moment. It was a child's dress on a woman. I couldn't throw it away because of the colours and the embroidered flowers, but the stitching on the bodice made it strain across my chest and it seemed both inappropriate and uncomfortable.

'Do you want me to undo some of the buttons on the back?' Jakey said.

I nodded. That seemed the simplest option.

His splinted fingers were at my neck, struggling with the tiny covered buttons. 'How many?'

'All of them.'

'What?'

'Just. Please.'

Suddenly I couldn't wait to get out of it, and the feeling of being constrained was terrifying after I'd acknowledged it. I cracked my knuckles, then went back and cracked the smaller knuckles at the tops of my fingers. I shook my hands out, and panic slammed into me. The horizon swooped grotesquely and the colours of the sunset were in the water and black spots were spreading out over my eyes. The fence swayed against my weight and the air was tight in my throat. I started, and Jakey murmured to me like I was a horse ready to bolt.

'Nearly there. Just a few more.'

It took forever. Then he got the last button and the dress loosed out over my chest. I took a deep breath in and the world came back.

The smell of salt, all the different types of it, the brine of the water and the salt crisping over seaweed on the rocks, and the buzz of it in the air making clothes rot on skin. My sweat smelled of laundry detergent first, and then deodorant, and then insect spray. But underneath the chemicals

the salt was there too, pushing out and over everything else. I felt Jakey at the side of me, and opened my eyes.

'Thank you. I love you.'

'Are you ok?'

'I'm better now, thanks. Go in, puppy. I'll be in soon. Save me some pudding.'

He walked reluctantly towards the doors and waved at me before being swallowed by the shade of the club.

On wobbly legs I cut away from the tennis courts, across the carpark where heat was still rising in waves, and out to a small beach on the east side of the spit. Even after that short walk the heat rash on my thighs was inflamed and I was tugging my arms out of the sleeves before I got off the tarmac onto the sand. A final wrench pulled a seam loose with a tiny crackle and then I tore the dress down over my legs and stepped out of it and my sandals at the same time. The beach was poor, with rocks dragging the water and weeds everywhere, but it faced away from the power-station. Over the cove I could see the masts of boats at the sailing club and, beyond them, the uppermost limbs of the giant fig tree. I felt less strange then, and waded into the water. It was blood warm, but still cooler than me. I slipped off a rock, stubbed my toe, and eventually gave up and laid down full-length. If I breathed right and concentrated, I could stay submerged and yet still clear of the rocks just an inch below me. The task was calming, and I stayed there long enough to watch the first stars poke out through the lilac sky. Weeds were wrapping themselves around my ankles and I felt their brush against my neck, so I crawled out of the shallows and laid marooned on the beach in my underwear.

The beach wasn't sand at all, but ground fragments of white shell, which gave it a clean shift under me. It made me think that it could be eaten, if someone needed to enough – the same way that it was possible to eat eggshell caught in a batter.

The beautiful part of it was lying back with wet hair, pushing my skull into it like a cat butting for attention, then waiting for it to dry onto my scalp. I laid there whilst the lights from the shipping

channel blinked at me almost invisibly against the dusk. Half an hour later, I scratched my head slowly, each shell-fleck peeling off with a sharp itch.

Then there was the knowledge that this was the last time I'd ever sit there scratching beach off my scalp behind the summer ball, watching the sky fade out and letting the water whisper wash everything away. I shuddered. A breeze had come over the water and sliced through the stew of heat around me. It ruffled me and said *this is over now, the last has happened. Get up and walk away.*

So I did. I knotted my hair into plaits and climbed back into my ridiculous dress. I fastened the top button at the back of my neck but left the others undone with my back free to breathe. I didn't want to make an entrance through the club doors, so I edged over the rocks round the sides of the building and emerged behind the band on the terrace.

The bassist looked up from his stand just in time to watch me trail past. He was short and dark-eyed, half-islander and half out of there like everyone else. I smiled at him and he hit a note a half-beat behind the music. He frowned and jolted back to almost-time, struggled, then stopped to find his place. I snorted and sat on the wall in the twilight with my arm around a column. I'd never liked swing.

A breath of rum and coke fogged the air, and Mr. Tudor was clambering onto the wall behind me, muttering 'hell-blast' as his shorts snagged on a nail, finally levering himself into position next to me. His face was as red as the poppies on his shirt.

The drink sent him straight past pleasantries. 'Jessamine. Up to no good I see.'

'Oh yeah. What do you see?'

'A band on the bloody run. You're better than this.'

'Hm.'

'At least you've picked your enemies. Swing.' He pulled a face and shuddered,

'Poor man's jazz.'

I laughed and took his drink out of his hand and sniffed it. There was more than a double in there.



'In your cups sir?'

'Not anymore it seems', and took the glass back. Then he slapped his free hand onto his face and moaned gently as the band underwent a sudden modulation and launched into an up-tempo Killing Me Softly.

'Jesus Hellcat Christ, kill me softly now Jasmine, before this gets any worse. Poor Roberta Flack'll be spinning in her grave.'

'I didn't know she was dead.'

'Who isn't dead?' He leaned in and looked at me and I realised that he was past half-cut into a place I didn't recognise him.

'Roberta Flack.'

'You're better than this', he said again.

'Yeah? You mentioned that.' He was too close. I leaned further against the column and inched my thigh away from his.

'I mean it, Jazz. What are you going to do with yourself now? You've more brains and bloody... *nous*, than anyone in this dump. And you're pissing it away making boys trip over themselves and hanging out with dead-men walking.'

He waved his drink around vaguely, making it unclear who the boys and dead-men were. His elbow brushed my rib and my whole right side prickled from the proximity.

'It's such a fucking disappointment. I thought you were better. I thought you'd get out of here alive.'

We sat in silence whilst the band hammered at us. He took a deep shuddering breath and started shuffling down from the wall.

'Ignore me, Jesamy.' I don't think he'd ever called me by my name before. He rested his hand heavily on my bare leg, 'ignore me please.' Then he walked away into the crowd.

*Jakey*

I was just sitting there at the table guarding two bowls of melted ice-cream when Jesamy drifted over to me. She didn't look too good. Her dress was still undone down the back and she was getting looks from people all over the show. Men and women nodding and smiling and staring sideways and ignoring her. I don't think she was in the kind of mood where she'd notice. Her eyes were a bit far away, and when I said 'hey' she just kind of said 'mmhm' back. She sat down next to me and that's when I noticed her hair. It was in two big plaits and twisted up and matted like boat-ropes after they're taken out of the water. It was kind of damp, with bits of sand in it, and had a weird smell.

'Jesamy?'

'Yeah.' She dipped a spoon in one of the bowls and stirred a swirl into the milk.

'Why does your hair smell of petrol?'

'Hm?' She looked up at me, frowned, then picked a plait up and sniffed it. 'Does it?'

I did the same on the other plait. 'Yeah, it's pretty bad. And why is it wet?'

She went back to stirring. 'I went for a little swim before.'

It was leading there but still I was shocked. 'Where?'

'Just on one of the inlets behind the club.'

'Shit!'

'What?'

But then she kind of snapped to herself as I said 'but the beaches are still closed.'

There was real shock on her face and I knew that something had happened to her before, one of her moments that had made everything seem unreal and dying.

'Fuck', she said, 'what am I gonna do?'

I'd already stood up. I grabbed her arm and pulled her along with me.

'We're going to go see if the shower-blocks are open.'

She came with me, not resisting, but I kept hold of her arm anyway. As we skirted the edges of the crowd I felt Ash notice us and he slinked away from the bar to follow us. Away from the tables and candles and music of the ball, everything was dark near the tennis courts. Lights over the water were boats still in Petrol Bay but we didn't look over there. The shower-blocks were open, and me and Ash filed in after her. The automatic strip lights didn't come on. The floor was sandy and the sewage-bleach smell was the same as always. There were no curtains or screens but Jesamy quickly pulled her dress off and turned a shower on.

'Can you guys see any soap?'

Ash went scouting off in the changing stalls and Jesamy was bending down into the tray that was already filling up with water from all the sand in the drains.

'None here' Ash said, and I couldn't find any either.

'It's not shifting' she said, 'the smell isn't going and the plaits won't come loose!'

There was a little edge of panic in her voice and that immediately made me and Ash jump to it.

'Right.' Ash said. 'Jakey, go into the toilets inside and see if you can find any soap. We'll be back in a second Jesamy.'

We both hared off back into the lights and heat of the ball, me heading inside and Ash going up to the bar.

When we met again out by the tables on the terrace I had a bottle of that horrible pink pearly soap that smelled of violet sweets. Ash had a glass with something in it.

'What's that?'

He held it up for me to see and it was loads of lemon wedges. He started squeezing them into the glass as we walked. I didn't ask about it, but he said with a grim look on his face, 'I've never washed diesel out of hair before.' I grabbed a few candles off an outlying table as we passed them.

In the showers, Jesamy was just standing still under the water. I put a candle on a ledge near her, then one on the sinks where I was sitting. Ash took his shirt and shoes off and got into the flooding shower tray with his glass of lemon-juice, avoiding the spray. He started slowly pouring and

fingercombing it over her hair and she was silent, even though he must have been hurting her. I could feel his frustration building up as big hanks of hair wouldn't untangle.

'What the fuck were you doing? You knew the beaches were closed!'

'I don't know, Ash' she murmured, so I could barely hear her through the hair and the water.

'Something isn't right.'

He didn't seem to get her struggle and just barged right on. 'And why did you have to choose a beach literally next to Petrol Bay?'

She didn't reply and we were quiet then, with just the sound of Ash muttering in the dark.

Later she whispered 'Am I gonna be ok? Is it bad?'

'Nah. It's not the heavy fuel, it's just some diesel that drifted over. Probably from one of the boats. It's just smelly, it's not dangerous.'

'So I'm not an oil spill bird?'

'You're not an oil spill bird. Did you swallow any?'

She looked up then. 'A normal amount, why? Is it poisonous?'

'Just a sip?'

'Yeah.'

He kind of sucked his teeth. 'You'll be alright. Your acceleration won't be great but you'll get better mileage.'

I didn't understand and got scared then. 'What do you mean?'

'He's joking,' Jesamy said. 'I'm fine.'

He worked at her head for another ten minutes or so, this time with the horrible soap. I sat there with my feet in the sink and watched the candle flickering. When she finally got out of the shower the tray had flooded water all over the floor right out to the door.

Ash handed her his shirt. 'Dry yourself on this. It's navy, no-one will notice.'

When she was dressed again there was no difference to the way she looked apart from her hair was just wetter. We trekked floppy wet footprints out of there, and then bumped into Malina who was just kind of wandering past outside.

She smiled. 'Are you ok?'

We didn't look at each other, but we all thought it: dieselhair + swim + beach ban + Stephen = massive trouble.

'Yeah, just got a bit hot,' Jesamy said, 'popped in for a quick shower to get the humidity off me. This dress is too small, I think it needs to be thrown away!'

Ma smiled back. 'If it gets any hotter I will have a shower too!'

She knew we were bullshitting, but we were back home and somehow that was her fault, so Ash and Jesamy weren't talking to her again. She drifted back up to the terrace to find Stephen, and we followed more slowly.

*Jesamy*

As we walked back to the table, some kind of quiet struggle was happening on the terrace between one of Stephen's men, Mr Clark, and Mr Tudor. People were starting to look over at them.

'I don't know exactly what he found out, Martin, but that lad knew something about this.'

Mr Tudor was staring at Mr Clark so hard that he moved slightly away from him down the steps, but Mr Tudor spread his arms out wide and spoke louder so that we all heard him.

'He knew about the explosion before it happened and he couldn't deal with it. Not thirty yet and he wrapped a rope around his neck and jumped off a fairground ride! And for whatever reason you wouldn't rent out the church for his funeral. His wife took him down the beach like it was a bloody picnic, did you know that?'

At this point, some of the other quiet men came over. One put his arm on Mr Tudor's and said

'Chris, look. Come and sit down', but Mr Tudor shook him off.

'No! Every bugger here is doing their own speculating, believe me. I'm not the only one.' He gesticulated at the crowd who were all standing awkwardly now, not talking, just watching him. Some people shook their heads, but Mr Tudor continued.

'If he knew about it beforehand then it definitely wasn't an "accident", was it? Who set that fire? No prizes for guessing *why*. I'm just saying what we all know. In three years our lease, occupation, whatever you want to call it, is up. But for some reason there's no demob, we're all just carrying on as normal, and now all of a sudden *this* has happened and we're refusing to help.'

'Chris –' Mr Clark interrupted him again.

Mr Tudor's face was red, and I sensed his rising upset as his voice got higher.

'Look at us! Drinking Champagne as the ship goes down! Twenty people died just there, *just there*' he gestured out towards Petrol Bay, 'and a damn-sight more will if this shit doesn't get sorted out. We're turning our backs on the job-lot of it, so that they'll have to beg us. But I tell you what lads, it's not going to work! They're too far gone to get on their knees. They're going to blame us.'

At that, he stabbed one finger at the quiet men, and one finger at his own chest. 'And Christ alive I don't want to be here when that happens.'

He turned to go down the steps, but staggered, and that's when Stephen moved in and took his shoulder. It could have been to help him, but Mr Tudor jerked his whole body out of the way and spun on him, furious.

'Aha, the Grandmaster! You think you know everything, don't you? Prying about into everyone else's business but paying no heed to your own.'

'Chris.'

'*Stephen*. If you spent half as much time with your family as you did controlling the rest of us, you might actually see what's going on right under your nose.'

Stephen shook his head then, and gestured with his right hand to three men standing at the bottom of the steps. As they surged forward Mr Tudor backed away, before looking at Stephen meaningfully and saying 'open your eyes man. Just look at your kids, look at your *child-bride*, for God's sake.'

Those who'd heard what he'd said went completely silent and stared over us. I spotted Malina further back in the crowd. She was clenching and unclenching one fist too quickly and she looked scared and crazy and young. Tina was elbowing her way through people to reach her, and laid a protective arm around her back and pulled her away from the stares. No one was there to put an arm around us, or to stop Stephen looking over at us incredulously, furiously, as if this were our fault.

*Ash*

Jesamy flicks her head round to look at you and her hair swings droplets onto her dress and your arm.

*Ash*, she says, but this isn't the kind of thing you can stop or wash out for her.

No need to wait until he blurts out what exactly it is about you that is so bad, so it seems safer to skirt back around onto the rocks behind the band. Wait there in the quieter dark until Tudor lurches out the front to the tennis courts before the three of you leave. By the time you reach the car-parks you see the stooped back of an old drunk man disappearing down the coast road and he's close enough to chase but too far gone to catch up with. Put a restraining hand on Jesamy's arm so she doesn't run after him. Give him the decency of a black-out and then a sore morning before trying to solve the troubles of a troubled man. Scratch off the wit and the flowery shirts and there's something shifting dark under there. It's big enough to pull Jesamy and Jakey under with him and that won't happen on your watch, not now he's got the three of you and Malina involved. You stand on the road leading to Fisherman's and behind you at the ball there's the scream of a PA system and the speeches have started. Tap a fag out of the crushed pack in your pocket and light it, not sure what to do beyond that. Blow a few smoke-rings into the dark sky.

*Can I try?* Jakey holds a hand out.

*No* Jesamy says immediately so you laugh and take another drag.

*Sorry buddy.*

*But I'm fourteen!*

*Exactly* she fires back.

*Wasn't Ash younger than me when he started?*

*That doesn't count. He's-*

*-What?*

You laugh. *Yeah, I'm what?*

*Different*, she finishes lamely.



*You mean stupid, you say.*

*That too. And quitting soon.*

Quirk an eyebrow at her. *When was I gonna find out about this?*

*Shortly after you go on the lung transplant list. I give it six months.*

*Dark.*

She shrugs.

Jakey's bored by this. *Can I just try it, please? Once?*

Pass him the cig behind Jesamy's back and he's taking a drag when she hits you on the arm, quite hard, and snaps at him, *don't inhale any.*

He leans his head back and puffs out some smoke, in roughly a globe.

*Right. That's it, that was shit, and you've finished now.* And as he's raising it for another drag Jesamy slaps the fag out of his hand to the tarmac and grinds it out.

*Hey!* You and Jakey both say at the same time.

*Enough. Boys.* There's no weight to it, but you're both so used to snapping to that you shut up and keep walking.

*What's next?* you ask.

*Home,* she says, and that's where you go.

When you're back the three of you set up the drinks and cards on the veranda. Jesamy's looking a bit peaky after a day on nothing but tonic water and ice-cream so even though you're a bit pissed you rustle together a nice frittata for her, peppers and onions and chilli the whole shebang. She's in your Freddie Mercury tee that she wears as a nightie when you come back out.

*When are you gonna get your own clothes?*

*Nah.*

*Fair play.*

She smiles at you. *Cheers for this by the way. It's lovely.* She's feeding herself one bite, then offering the fork to Jakey, then having another bite. Seems like he only eats these days if one of you hand-feeds him.

He chews slowly and then asks. *So what did you think he meant?*

Jesamy's still eating so you say, *hm?*

*What Mr Tudor was saying? About us?*

Jesamy shakes her head imperceptibly but that could mean *anything*, or *I don't know*, or *don't say it*, or *everything*, so that's not helpful.

*No idea, mate.*

*He doesn't have anything on us? That he would tell anyone, or...Stephen?*

Jesamy puts her hand on Jakey's arm then. *He doesn't know about you and Benny.*

He looks a bit desperate. *There's nothing with me and Benny!*

*Exactly, bubs. Nothing to worry about then. Nobody knows anything.* She pulls him into a loose hug. *Seriously. Even if he does have something on us, it's nothing to do with you.*

She looks over at you then, as if there's something there between you two for him to find out, but there can't be.

You take over. *He was pissed, that's all. He was riling Stephen.*

*But he knew about the hangman.*

*Everyone knows about the hangman.*

*Maybe he knows we found him.*

Jakey. Lean forward and fix him with a stare. *We didn't find him. We just saw him. The police found him. We didn't do anything wrong. It's fine. Chill out man.*

*But is it true, the hangman and the explosion and everything?*

That's easier. *Ah nah. He's just making trouble.*

Jesamy chimes in. *He's got a bee in his bonnet about all of this though and I'm not sure why. You said it yourself we're not helping now it's happened, even though we easily could.*

If that fucking man's wound her up about this it'll ruin the summer. You light a fag and lean back as you exhale. *I reckon everyone needs to calm down. They're just figuring all this out. And no one's got the story straight yet. It only happened a few weeks ago.*

She's not letting it go. *It's all a bit linked up though isn't it?*

*Hm. So are a lot of things.*

Jakey stops eating and looks at you as if he's got something to say, then he comes out with it.

*He was being weird about Malina.*

*He was shit-stirring. Stephen is obviously older than her. But she was eighteen when they got married, not twelve.*

*No, not that. He was weird about her ages ago.*

*What? You and Jesamy say.*

*Yeah. When he drove me home that time, he kept banging on about looking after her once you've both gone.*

*Did he even know her then?*

*That's what I thought, he says. I didn't think so.*

*What did you say? Jesamy asks.*

*I can't really remember. I think I said how do you know her and he went red and started talking about a nest with only me in it or something.*

Jesamy stares at you, confused. *Could he? Be having?*

*An affair with Malina? You snort. When hell literally freezes over. Stephen would kill him. And her.*

You all know that's true.

*Alright. Not that. But the suggestion is bad enough. How does he know her? Why does he care?*

*Fuck knows. It's time to shut this bullshit down. But it'll involve the illuminati no doubt. Best stay out of his way for a while I reckon.*

Jesamy nods slowly, puts her fork down.

*Are you gonna finish that?* you ask them, pointing at the frittata.

Neither of them answer so you shovel it into your mouth, good potatoey eggs with just a bit of heat. In spite of that interfering old fuck damping your evening, the frittata is still bloody good even if you say so yourself.

## Jesamy

For the first time, I was angry with Mr Tudor. It was a new feeling and took me a while to realise it. Since we'd been down at the airbase I had wondered in passing whether Mr Tudor was more trouble than he was worth, causing scenes and getting Malina involved in 2am trysts. But for years I'd been his favourite at school, his protégé, the one he'd get out of trouble and share his biscuits with. He'd become someone I trusted and, if not a father figure, at least a funny uncle. He'd fucked it completely now though, and in a way I was glad it was so clear cut. If he'd just been drunk and rambling and getting slightly too close for comfort whilst watching the band, I could have passed it off as just another man who'd forgotten I was still a child. But playing with Stephen in public was inexcusable. This whole thing had been a show of dominance and it was arrogant, potentially dangerous. And, in fact, the other shit he'd done – calling his band The Official Secrets, writing sarky comments in my school reports, being the most popular guy at our barbeque, palling about with us when he knew it got up Stephen's nose, making Malina look after him when he was pissed – maybe all of that was just part of the same agenda. Because putting us at risk wasn't the behaviour of someone who cared about us at all, maybe it was yet another adult shirking the duty of care. Because he got to go home and lick his wounds, and we were the ones who had to deal with the fall-out.

In the morning, Stephen was in a horrendous mood. Barely speaking to Malina, not looking at us, but always aware of where we were and what we were doing. Every time I left my room I felt him in the air, and his disapproval of us was so tangible I almost wished that he'd come out and say whatever he wanted to us. I hated his quiet days more than anything. It was bad enough that we needed to get a bag together and head off garrison, get chippy for tea, and only come home after dark. So whilst Stephen was on the porch reading the paper and Malina was hanging some laundry out, I went into the kitchen and got us some oranges and chocolate and frozen water then went to find the boys. They were in Ash's bedroom with The Division Bell on in the background. Jakey was reading a book about sharks that he'd had since he was about six.

They looked up when I came in. 'Let's head out.' I said.

It was testament to how bad it was that they got up immediately and headed out to the car with me, despite there not really being anywhere to go. The beaches outside the garrison were cordoned off by tape and there were soldiers in trucks in each cove. This lasted all the way out to the zebra's penis lighthouse at the edge of the base area, then the hotels on the strip took over, with huge orange signs covering billboards and banners strung between palms showing a swimmer in the water being struck by lightning. They were the signs that went up all down the coast when the gales hit a few times a year; I supposed that the explosion and oil spill were unprecedented in terms of sign-making. The only way to get out of range of officials was to go much further east. Once in the car, Ash lit a fag and pulled out of our driveway. We got to the end of our road before he said, 'left or right?'

'Cracked Rock?' I said.

He nodded and headed left up to North.

'We're not going there again are we?' Jakey said.

'Have you got any other suggestions?' Ash replied, looking at him in the mirror.

Jakey sighed. 'It would be nice to not hang around in a building site.'

I snorted. 'If you can find a square inch of this island that isn't covered in half-built resorts I'll give you a tenner.'

'Or', Ash said, 'if you give me a tenner I can put enough diesel in the car to take us somewhere else. But as it stands I'm the one busting my ass to pay for this day trip.'

Jakey leaned forward. 'You're not busting anything, you're just tabbing off Stephen.'

'Exactly. I'm making an effort. Anyway. You can stay in the car if you don't want to come with us.'

The threat of being left behind made him into a puppy again and he sank into the backseat. I laughed as he muttered 'I never said I didn't want to go.'

We took the inland route going out of North behind the garrison and power-station, and there was only ever farms and scrub out there. But this time we cut a perfect straight line between black fields on one side, and red fields on the other.

'Jesus Christ' Ash said. He took his sunglasses off, then quickly put them back on again. 'We're on the fucking firebreak.'

He was right. The motorway had stopped the fire from jumping onto the desert. But everything on the coast-side had been eaten. Huts, houses, barns, all burnt to the ground. There were curved skeletons in the fields black and drippy, and I realised that they were the bones of the fruit tunnels.

'Look at that', Ash was pointing ahead. As we drew closer we saw a carob tree that was completely charred, apart from a few normal branches at the top growing fat green leaves that hadn't figured out yet that everything else was dead. At least three exits to coast villages had been closed off with signs and tape and I didn't want to imagine why. The smell of wet smoke and a strange chemical stink like burnt bleach was so strong that we had to roll the windows up and put the weak air-conditioning on but still it felt like we were being choked. Ash drove through the devastated landscape and we were silent, out of some kind of fear or respect. I looked in the back for Jakey and he may have been holding his breath, the way we all used to do when passing a grave-yard.

I breathed as small as I could, closed my eyes and waited for us to come out of the other end, and after a while we did. Maybe ten miles later we emerged back out into red fields and yellow scrub-land where trees clung to the limestone and I rolled down my window to breathe the day back in again.

Cracked Rock was the same as all the other resorts between the garrison and the cape. Dead. The arched concrete fronts of the hotels guarded the coastline like whale skeletons picked clean by the salt air. Someone must've sold the job lot of the land off to foreign developers, because no-one who had spent more than five years on the island would have touched it; rocky farmland in the earthquake zone. Cracked Rock was actually more developed than some of the resorts, one about five miles down the road had only got to the foundation stage before the most recent quake had struck, the same one that had split Cracked Rock in half. We went for the drama

of it, the long curved drive that was already planted with baby palms and hibiscus, the cement rectangles poured for the tennis courts, and the imposing concrete facade gap-toothed with windows. The only hint of what was to come was a jagged black rent down the front of it. But as soon as you walked through the double front doors, it was carnage inside. A rift in the rock had opened up and the left hand side of the hotel had fallen into it. If you edged over past where the reception desk had been, you could stare down into the mess of rubble and see the rock striating from red earth to sandstone. There was no bottom or end to the crack, it seemed like a fault that had always been waiting to be opened up. At some parts it was five metres or so wide, and uncrossable in any way. And then in places it was a handspan wide, stepped over easily or even bridged by a flip-flopped foot. With the full knowledge that a mistep could cause the earth to split like ice and trigger another landslide that would take the rest of the hotel and everything else into the crack. The right hand side of the hotel had stayed standing but looked as if a push would topple it.

I loved Cracked Rock. Without the tourists the building was beautiful. The way the earth had risen to eat slabs of concrete, buckling the surface. I loved the way no-one had come to clear away the debris or knock down the walls, proving what we knew already: that without the money, no-one gave a shit about this stretch of coastline. I loved the way the sea had washed over the scrubland where the lawns would have been and poured into the pool making a crabby zoo out of what would have been a square of chlorine. I loved the palm trees that had seeded there a long time before anyone had thought about hotels, and tossed their spiky heads metres taller than anything human-made.

We made camp under the biggest palm, the one that was twice the height of the others. Ash pulled his t-shirt off and we all squeezed onto it to avoid burning our legs on the sand. The sand was the real stuff, gritty and thick, almost still rock. They'd poured bullshit sand in, imported from the deserts over the water, but it had washed out after one winter and left behind these pebbles. I leaned back under the slim shade from the palm leaves. The fronds at the ends waved like fingers from the leaves. Jakey was next to me and I pulled him sideways onto my lap so that I could knit his hair into narrow plaits. He relaxed to the feeling of my fingers on his scalp, finger-



combing and sorting it into bunches. I could almost feel the sensation of my hair being gently tugged and shivered at the thought of someone doing that to me. Ash tore an orange apart with his teeth as if it were an apple. Flesh spilled out and he licked a line of juice off his forearm, nudging me with his elbow.

I looked at him. 'You're eating that like a fucking savage.'

He raised his eyebrows and continued ripping orange flesh from the skin. He nodded at Jakey, whose eyes were closed. 'What're you doing with his hair?'

'Just plaiting it.'

'All of it?'

'Maybe.' I leaned closer over Jakey to start the first braid. The shadows of the leaves flickered over his face and I inhaled the smell of his scalp: sunscreen and mint soap.

'Hey check it out', Jakey held his hand out. A conch shell rested on his palm, then stretched jointed legs out of the lip and walked off, tumbling to the sand. Jakey gave a short yelp, shuddered extravagantly and wiped his hand on Ash's back.

'Pussy.' Ash said.

It was nothing. But it wasn't big, isolated incidents that broke people, I knew that as well as anyone else. It was the slow stacking of micro-cruelties, half-assed bullying that made you feel worthless and alone. Out of any of the people who couldn't give a shit about Jakey, from Ash it was the worst.

I got up and started walking silently back to the car.

'Hey,' Ash said, and, when I didn't respond, 'hey'.

I heard him scrambling up and he soon caught up with me. 'So that's it then? We drove all the way out here for ten minutes?'

'That's it.'

I was tired of it all. Tired of not being able to trust anyone. I wanted to go home, even though there wasn't one to go to. I was tired of that too. Where do you run to when there's nowhere else to run?

*Jakey*

As we walked back down the drive to the car I suddenly started sprinting and tagged the car and shouted SHOTGUN at the top of my lungs. I swung myself into the passenger and wedged myself in with my feet on the dash. There were dusty footprints on there already from Jesamy. I'm not sure why, but for some reason I really just wanted Ash and Jesamy to take a break from each other for like five minutes. Jesamy had a straight face when she got to the car and just stood by the door and said 'Jakey, get in the back.'

I smiled and shook my head.

Jesamy huffed into the back and then started digging her knees into the back of my chair.

I turned to her. 'Quit it!'

'Stop talking like you're in a cartoon and move your fucking chair forwards.'

Because Ash was laughing I did too, and knew her grump wouldn't last long. Sure enough, as soon as we got onto the dirt road and the air started blasting in and Ash put The Black Parade on especially for her, she started singing along with her hair all whipping about. In the wing-mirror I could see that she'd put one foot out of the window, reddybrown from the dust, and wished that I could live like her, like some lyrics about a girl no-one can touch.

She leaned forward in the middle of House of Wolves and said 'Ash. We could stop by Fisherman's Cove.' It wasn't a question, but I could tell from the way Ash turned his head into the wind to spit a bit of baccy out that he'd said no.

'Why not?'

'It's too weird. We never told anyone.' He stubbed his fag out in the cupholder even though it was only half-smoked.

'That wasn't our responsibility. And there was nothing we could do. He did it hours before we got there.'

Ash just put another fag in his mouth and gave me the lighter. He kept his eyes on the road, but leaned over to me, and I put my hands round the flame and lit it.

She kept on: 'If you don't want to come, you don't have to. But will you drop me off at the woods on the way back?'

Ash just nodded.

'What's happening at the cove?' I asked.

'It's the funeral today' Jesamy said.

'Funeral?'

'Wake, maybe.'

'Who for?'

'The guy. The hangman.'

'Oh.' It didn't occur to me to ask how she'd known that.

The whole way back we didn't speak. Ash didn't smoke the fag, and let it burn down in his fingers.

When we got to the woods behind the cove, Ash parked up and got out. Jesamy chucked flip-flops out at us so it looked like we were all going, even though as far as I'd seen nothing else had been said. We walked through the woods all drinking from a bottle of water that had sand round the rim. I didn't want to look down the path, because there was a line of cars going from the little church above Fisherman's all down the coast road. Looked like we'd missed the actual thing, because there were people all standing around hugging and shaking hands, and getting in the cars. We waited at the edge of the woods, Ash climbing the barbed wire to get a leg up into a eucalyptus. When he was up he took his belt off and dangled it over a branch and Jesamy grabbed both sides of it and scrabbled her feet up the bark and hooked her knees up onto the branch. Then Ash dragged her the rest of the way and held her waist steady so I guess they'd made up.

We stayed there till everyone left. I don't know why. The wind was picking up and stirring the water around into the air and I just wanted to go home and have a shower to get the salty itch off my skin.

At some signal that I missed, Ash swung himself under the branch and hung for a second before dropping down. He looked up and said to Jesamy 'hang down and give me your feet.' When

she did he kind of hugged her ankles and held her as she slithered down his chest. He held on even after she'd touched the ground and I was like, for fuck's sake, and walked off over the road to the cove, which is why I saw it first.

I had no idea what to call it. A couple of words flashed through my head like bonfire, pylon, pyramid, tepee.

'Shit. Is that a pyre?' Jesamy said, and that was the word I was looking for.

Ash jumped down the rocks onto the beach and looked at it for a second before saying 'I don't think so. Come on' and he held his hands out for us. We took one each to jump down, but when we were on the shingle he didn't let go. I quickly scanned the beach for anyone who knew us, but there was no-one, and the feel of Ash's palm on mine made me feel much calmer about walking up to it.

Up close it was obvious there was no room for a body in it, and it was weirdly beautiful in its own way. There was one massive branch dug upright into the shingle, and leaning on it were logs and planks and sticks and branches, more and more the closer you looked, until there were loads of tiny ones inside. There was a wooden oar there, and a bit of a fruit box, and a load of driftwood that was all twisty and white. All the pieces had bits of string or cord tied on, and some had twine, and some had ribbons, and some had boat rope, and if you looked carefully there were twizzles of hair. There were some rings fitted onto the twigs, and bracelets and necklaces, and one watch, and quite a few of those charity rubber bands. People had carved little messages and drawings in the wood, and next to my knee was a picture of an eagle. At the top of the big branch there was some fluffy seaweed and a bit of fishing net with a feather stuck in it, kind of like the fairy on the Christmas tree. All around the base in a big spiral there were rocks and pebbles, lined up in patterns and swirls. There were three oranges in a row, and a bottle of beer dug into the shingle. That bit gave me a lump in my throat, because he was a whole real person. When I looked over at Jesamy she was biting her lip like she does when she's upset. She was reading a piece of laminated paper that was tied to the twigs with fishing wire.

Here does not lie David Maguire.

Father, Husband, Son, Brother, Friend and

Bloody Good Bloke

Underneath that was a picture of the hangman with his arm around an Alsatian and holding the hand of a little boy wearing heart-shaped sunglasses. At the bottom it said 'Taken too soon.' and that was it. No dates or anything, or how he died.



*Jesamy*

There was just one last party left to go before Malina and Stephen finally went off on holiday – another attendance-mandatory thing. Some doctor retiring and welcoming his replacement. We'd decided to skip at the last minute, but then Malina told us it was off-base, and there was a pool, so that was the boys decided then.

We dressed in our newer beach clothes and sat squashed together in the back of Stephen's car, the wind through the windows blowing my hair across Jakey and Ash.

The village was an ex-pat favourite and most of the retired officers bought houses out there. I got it. It was everything the garrison wasn't, organic, wonky, with jasmine and orange trees in every garden. The moon was so fat it looked like a wheel of brie, greasy light all over the sea, and between the buildings there were white birds free-falling to the street. Dogs ran across the street as we slammed the car door and walked up to the garden gate. There was the lovely hub of voices and the sound of splashing water and I wondered whether I might actually have a nice time.

For an hour or so, I did. Then I went inside the house to refill our drinks. I was at the kitchen counter scooping ice out of the bowl when one of the more senior doctors came in. I'd forgotten his name, but had noticed him looking over at me occasionally throughout the evening. Despite the crush in the kitchen, he managed to squeeze in next to me. I was pouring tonic into our glasses when I felt his hand stroke a line across my lower back. I started, but the people in front of me were so tightly packed that I couldn't move.

'How's it going, Jesamy?' A wife was smiling over, too old to have trouble with me.

'Fine, thank you' I smiled back at her.

His fingers crept into the waistband of my shorts so that his thumb rested gently at the top of my bum.

'So are you off to uni this year?'

My face was hot and I could feel sweat breaking out all over me. Stupidly, I was embarrassed that he might feel it. I cleared my throat. 'Yes, me and Ash.'

'And where have you chosen?'

He started to creep his fingers lower, and I wrenched away from him, slopping the drinks a little onto the feet of the people next to me. From the corner of my eye I saw him lift his hand to his mouth, smiling.

'Scuse me' I said. 'I need to –' and gestured to the door.

'Oh' she said, 'ok', and stepped out of my way.

Outside again I realised my legs were trembling, but it wasn't all bad. I'd just had an idea.



*Ash*

Off the garrison everything's much louder, villagers sitting out on porches, cats fighting, chickens scratting at the dust, churchbells banging, dogs barking on chains, kids on mopeds up and down the street. This place is ex-pat, has walls and gardens and it sits on the cliff but it's still a different country. The power went off half an hour ago, there was a scrum in the kitchen for hurricane lamps and candles and *shit Jeremy, put the ice-cubes in the beer bucket* and then everything else ending up in there as well, jars of yoghurt and half a cod in plastic and bottles of milk so they don't spoil. Someone found a bunch of tiki torches and some paper-lanterns, and put a load of candles in jam-jars so now it looks like a five-star with the lamps all around the pool.

The pool's what brought you here. It's scummed up a bit with the power cuts, not enough juice in the generators to keep it clean, but the algae is mainly in the deep end and it's dark anyway so no one cares. Jakey's in there on a lilo wearing sunglasses to hide from the boarding school kids out on holiday. You put your feet in the water just to get a break from the sweat stinging out of the backs of your knees but it makes you forget the difference between inside yourself and outside. There's a thermometer tied to the steps and it's like you called it, 37 degrees, the temperature of blood. Someone hands you a slice of cake, black mousse on the bottom, brown and white mousse in layers then a thick chocolate sheen on top with whole hazelnuts embedded, you eat it before it melts.

Jesamy hasn't eaten tonight, her and Jakey have been drinking tonic water with ice and lemon. She leans over slides her finger round your plate and licks the chocolate off it, *chill out, I'll get you a slice if you want* even though you're not bothered, but she shakes her head and walks off to the sun-hut in the corner of the garden. You take a beer from the bucket and follow her.

The hut's warm, too warm, but dark and the windows open onto the pool, it smells of airing-cupboard and suncream and you want to curl on some towels and sleep. She doesn't sit down when you pull a plastic chair up next to yours, but says something about the moon.

*What?*

*It's a full moon*

*Mm?*

*I don't know, can't you feel it? Like everything's too close? She's swirling the ice in her glass. Urgh. I can't explain.*

*Use your words.*

*There's this thing about positive and negative ions at full moon. It gets all out of whack, I can't remember which way round it is, but it makes you mental. Like, statistically there's about 30% more murders at full moon than any other time.*

*Really?*

*Well, I made that up, but it wouldn't surprise me. Hippies do this thing where they try to convert the ions...she's putting her glass down on the chair she's still not sat in, and moving behind you...by recharging them. It's supposed to make you, I'm not sure, it's a long time since I read it. But it really works. Take your top off and I'll show you*

*Why?*

*Never mind, it's alright.*

*No, no –*

You pull your t-shirt off, hold it in front of you awkward.

*Lean forward.*

Then her nails on your back, starting below the hair at your nape and moving down your spine so light you're barely feeling it, you shudder, can't help it, and she laughs,

*See what I mean?*

You're quiet a minute and so is she.

*Yeah.*

Then like she's no idea what she's done, she drops it. Picks her drink up and sits next to you, one foot tucked under, one foot on the door-frame. Chewing her ice-cube and looking out at Jakey in the pool.

*So should we sort him out soon then?*

*Yeah. Something not nice you said?* Usually the plan is just kicking someone in and you could do that you suppose.

*Mm. I chose one of the guys in his year.*

*Just one?*

*Yeah. This one seems in charge though.*

*Who?*

*One of the ones who chucked him off the balcony.* You both look away from that memory, still makes you furious to think of Jakey lying there covered in spit, and you've got more of an appetite for this plan now, whatever it is. *His name's Marcus.*

*Miller?*

*Yeah. Do you know him?*

*Shrug. A bit. He's on the other senior footie team. Playing us in the finals. Might want to wait until after then, they can't play a man down.*

*She sighs. Fucking football.*

*Don't get her started on football because there's not enough time in the day to listen to her views on team-sports. But it's soon, so we can do it straight after. What are you thinking? Kick his face in?*

*Mm, that as well.*

*As well as what?*

*Well, I was thinking. Maybe he's gonna rape someone?*

*Snort. It's not like we can arrange that though.*

*No?*

*Who?*

*She just smiles at you and cracks the ice-cube.*

*Shit. No.*

*C'mon. It'll be a laugh.*

*Who for? The kid's a wanker. And it's not like he'll go near you, he knows you're Jakey's sister.*

*Yeah, and he's got a dick, which makes that irrelevant.*

*No.*

*You doubting me?*

*Not that. Just. I don't want to think of-*

*His dad's an NCO. If you fuck him up, God knows. We need insurance.*

*Couldn't we just put it off on the guys on the strip?*

*What guys?*

Shrug. *Ah, some shit down the Horseshoes. A bet, I dunno. It didn't end well from what I heard.*

She shakes her head. *No. Too thin. I don't want any drama blowing back on us. His brother got kicked off island for less than this. He won't talk this way.*

She's right. You remember the silence after Liam left, no one said his name again, but it was all over something similar.

*Alright. The idea's making you feel sick already. But if he even touches you –*

*- You'll kick the shit out of him. We've established that. But I might as well have some fun and cover our asses at the same time.*

*Jesus. Your idea of fun.*

*Isn't as sophisticated as decking him? Have you never thought that I might need some control too?*

*What?*

You look over at her and her jaw is hard. *What?* you say again but she doesn't answer you.

Then she sighs out. *Anyway. You don't need to get involved with this if you don't want to. I can do it on my own.*

Heart stops to think what she'd do with him without you there.

*Not if you're actually going to shag him.*

*Might not need to. And I'm not asking your permission by the way.*

You look over at her and she's staring at the pool. Jakey's gone, there's just the QM on the lilo talking to the dentist sitting on the side. Then she's three steps out of the hut and you feel weightless for the second she's in the air and return to yourself when she hits the water. The spray puts a load of the candles out and a torch gutters smoke, the dentist's shirt is drenched and the QM loses his glasses in the darker water. They're instantly pissed, looking to see what fucking kid...then she's getting out with her top transparent and her shorts stuck dark to her ass and *haha, it's Jesamy! Where did you come from?*

*Jakey*

When I got out the pool I didn't really know what to do with myself. The first thing I'd done was scout for Benny, but not even his parents were there. I don't think his dad knew the kind of people that had houses in the village. Malina was in the kitchen talking to Tina, but Maisie and Black Beauty weren't with her so I felt too shy to join them. There were other kids, but they were the pale boarding school ones that only came back in the summer and were way too cool to talk to me. Mr Tudor hadn't been around since the Ball, and I'd given up on Ash and Jesamy, they'd fucked off to the back of the garden and whatever they were talking about didn't involve me. So there was no-one left to talk to but Stephen's 'friends'. Does a man who collects people based on what he wants from them have friends? I think of the men he works with like those Roman soldier formations. They've all got the same armour and when they're together they make a wall against everyone else. Doesn't matter what direction you come from, you're fucked if you think you're getting in. Put them on the waterboard and they'd grow gills, that's what Ash says. But if you're up for a laugh, it's interesting to talk to them. They've got you figured out ten steps ahead before you've even opened your mouth, and they can spin a story out of anything. So I picked my target: Mr Alston, the tall guy with round glasses and a really intense way of looking at you that you could almost find hot if he wasn't so old. Then I stood by the food table and pressed play.

'Jacob!'

'Mr Alston.'

'Are we having some of this lovely cake then?'

'Um yeah, do you want this bit? I only want a slither.'

'Haha, you can have more than a sliver, you're so thin I've seen more fat on a chip. So now, hey. Tell me what you've been up to.'

'Um.' Couldn't think what he'd find interesting about lying around eating melon, so I said 'we were down Fisherman's Cove this week and saw the pyre.'

'Which pyre is this?'

'The one on the beach, with all the string tied to it. The sign said it was for David Maguire.'

'Ah, David. Yes. A shame.' He looked down at his cake for a moment quietly before eating it.

'Did you know him?'

'Well, not in the biblical sense. Although I'm not totally sure what that means. I could never remember whether it was knowing his first name, or, the other thing...'

'What other thing?'

He wiped his knuckle at the corner of his mouth to get a bit of chocolate. 'Ignore me. No, I didn't know him personally.'

'Wasn't he one of you guys?'

'Ah, Jakey, I'm sure you've heard your dad say, "If I told you that I'd have to eat you" Haha. Speaking of, have you tried this jelly?'

'Yeah, Mal- my mum made it.'

'Elderflower. It's coming through really clearly, I wonder where she found elderflowers here, of all places!'

'We just buy the cordial from IKEA in the city.'

'IKEA! Of course, I suppose she feels right at home there. Did I tell you that I once fell asleep in one of their fake living rooms? Sat on one of those sofas whilst Linda was buying candles, and an assistant woke me up by offering me a cup of coffee. I only realised she'd been joking when she didn't come back...'

I didn't really know what to say to that, so I just smiled and looked out over to the moon. It was so big it felt like it might fall down and land in the pool.

'Sorry, Jakey, I went off on a tangent there. What was it you were saying?'

It felt kind of inappropriate to gatecrash the IKEA story with a question like this, so when I said it my voice was really quiet. 'I just wondered... whether it was true that he killed himself because he knew about the explosion before it happened?'

He looked straight at me in a way that made me a bit squirmy and turned-on. 'What do you think?'

'I dunno.'

'If I were you, I'd be careful where you ask these kind of questions. But you're inquisitive, and you should nurture that. Do you read a lot?'

'Not really. Jesamy does more of that kind of thing.'

'Yes, and now you'll tell me what Ash is good at. But what about you, who are you?'

We'd kind of drifted to the end of the porch where there were some candles on the railing. We were talking a bit quieter and it felt like I could do something weird like confess about seeing the hangman. Or say something that would make the heaviness in my chest a little bit less and free me up to be fourteen again.

'I'm not sure.'

'Not sure, or just not as special?'

That hurt because maybe it was true. I didn't reply but just dipped my fingertips in one of the tea-lights and made little wax-curls.

'Do you think when Ash and Jesamy go off to uni you'll have to figure that out a bit more?'

So then bam. All of a sudden I was getting a counselling session from a guy I'd never really spoken to before. And I'd completely forgotten about the hangman and all I could do was freak out about why I wasn't special, and what was gonna happen when Ash and Jesamy left which I was trying to avoid thinking about and wondering what I was gonna hold onto to keep myself afloat with Malina and Stephen and me in the house. And all of a sudden this weird, hot, old guy who knew me better than I did was the only thing in the world that I trusted and even then I didn't really but he was better than being alone.

Another guy came over with a beer for him and started talking. I did a don't-mind-me-I-need-to-be-over-here sidle off. As I walked off down the porch steps I noticed Stephen watching me but he didn't say anything. Then as soon as I got down to the pool Jesamy was there and she took my hand and we walked to the back of the garden. She was soaking wet and the pool was rocking water over into the gutters. She walked me to a tree – maybe it used to be an orange tree



although there wasn't any fruit. It was small and crooked and easy to climb up into. When she sat down the water sopped out of her shorts and t-shirt and trickled down the branch onto my feet. I kind of stood there wedged in. We were quiet for about fifteen seconds then she looked straight at me.

'You do know that it's going to be ok, don't you?'

Even though I wondered how everyone seemed to know what I was thinking, I just nodded.

'Ok.'



*Ash*

It's Jesamy's idea, to take Jakey swimming before you two go to the Bones tonight to start with Marcus. Stephen and Malina set off for ten days in the North this afternoon so the three of you may as well celebrate. You're all gagging for it besides, you go to sleep thinking of water and dream of blue and wake up thinking you're floating. The shower is never cold enough and you want to kick yourself backwards and get lost inside your own bubbles. So while Stephen and Malina are packing and getting laundry off the line you slip some cash out of the alms box in the kitchen and drive off without saying goodbye.

Heading down to the strip you realise you could get into one of the hotel pools for free, by walking in off the beach-side and slipping right in, the right shape and age and colour to be one of the 18-30 crowd. But now with the power-cuts and the drought there's pool nazis everywhere checking wristbands making sure you're not a local coming in for a bath. With the wristbands there's free ice-cream and chips and drinks so you might as well go on holiday.

You give Jakey the pick of places, just the big hotels with generators, and cruise down the strip and back again as he chooses the Palm Beach, a glass-sided monster with stepping stones across three pools, two slides, submerged bar, jacuzzi, and more flesh than a beach full of sea-lions. You lost your virginity down here, or maybe it was the Golden Bay next door. You've been coming to the strip since you were fourteen with Tan and Zeke and Saf keeping tabs and getting high. The first time it was a brunette with a yellow bikini and she chose you out of the men sharking around the pool. The girl that took you up to her airconned room two hours later isn't as clear in your mind.

As you three walk through the lobby out to the pool you can see that nothing's changed since you were last here. The stench of Bacardi and sun oil, the rows of shining legs. Jesamy is unhappy, you can feel it on her. She's too white, she's always too white, but here it's almost ugly. She's too tall, too thin, too recognisable as not one of them. People are watching her walk past to see if she's someone worth watching. You gather round a lone free sunbed and she puts the umbrella up and her suncream on in the shade. Has a sip from the frozen water bottle and tries to protect herself from the sun and the throbbing music and the tourists that she hates and fears in

equal measure. Her and Jakey have clicked into each other as the odd ones out and weirdly you're left out because you can deal with this place. She butters Jakey's back zinc-white holding one arm firmly as he tries to squirm away. You wonder why he's wriggling, if it was your back she was rubbing you'd stand stock still and wish that time would break. She works around and around his shoulder-blades that stand out like knives from his back and as her fingers rub down the knobbles of his spine, you wonder briefly when he got so skinny.

Blueish and greasy Jakey says, *are you coming?* but he doesn't mean it.

*In a bit, just gonna go get a beer.*

They walk through the crowd to the deep end where it's quieter and plop into the water together.

You get into the shallow end and swim up to the bar. The water is warm and tastes of suncream and piss under the chlorine but it's so good to be submerged. You lean your elbows up at the bar and nod at the barman. Through the shelves of bottles you can see a pack of girls on sunbeds behind the bar sunburned and brown, skin peeling off their shoulders and giddy giggling drunk already. The alpha sees you watching, waves her drink at you and the other ones laugh along but go silent as they watch her slip into the water. Something to learn here, girls. Take your beer and turn your back on them to lean over the grate of the pool, watching the sea and half-wishing you were there not here. She's chewing gum you smell it over the water as she swims to you. She perches on the side with a heave of body and water and then you're trapped. Kind of. Not at all really, but maybe you want to be.

*I'm Melissa.* Fleshwise, she's alright. Big boobs big ass, creases in her thighs and tight smooth skin everywhere.

You smile at her. *I don't care.*

A flicker in her eyes and then she smiles back, harder. She chose you for how you look, expected the kind of man that would fuck a woman he found in a pool and got one.

*You here with anyone?*

*Nah.*

*What about them?* She nods towards Jesamy and Jakey doing the stepping stones across the pool.

*Wife and kid.*

*I'm not getting a straight answer out of you am I?* Stares at you a slow second then makes up her mind. *Are you coming with me?*

Shrug, but when she stands up you knee yourself out of the pool and follow her draining your beer.

The women's changing rooms, a stall at the back. There's one flipflop in there, small and purple under the bench and for some reason you want to pick it up find the foot and match it. But then she's pulling the string at the neck of her bikini up, unknotting it in a way that's too familiar and how dare she slut at you with your sister's movements? For a minute you're too sick to breathe, but then the bikini drops and her nipples poke out so you grab at them. She leans back and spits her gum on the floor then giggles and you need to shut her up. Let go of her tits and pull her closer so they're bobbling fatly away against your chest, that way you don't have to look at how tanned she is, and the ragged skin on her shoulders. She isn't real. Swing your St. Christopher onto the back of your neck so nothing of Jesamy's is touching her. Bubblegum breath in your face then she's kissing you. Wet in there, wet cheeks wet tongue and underneath emptiness, you could force your tongue to the back of her mouth, down her throat, down down it's all corridors in there linking nothing to nothing. Pull back out of the dark corridors and look up at the square of sky above the changing rooms, cloudless and hard and a leaning palm crackling with the breeze off the sea. You can smell the salt and it's making you lonely, this isn't your place this isn't your girl. But somehow your shorts are down and she's harding you, twisting that slippery brown body against your crotch and grabbing your dick. Everything tightens up towards her, dick pulling balls along for the ride and the rubbing is making you furious. You can't even look at her with those thick lips looking for a kiss that's not coming so twist her til she's braced against the wall, back to you.

*Got a condom?* she says, and though she can't see you, roll your eyes. Where would you have been hiding that?

*No.*

*Well pull out before you come.*

Rip bikini bottoms to the side and enter her. Fucking relief to be somewhere warm and tight. She's doing a weird jiggling up and down back and forth and you remember that she's here too making the best of a bad job. It's making you slide further into her, and you're alone again going quickly towards nowhere. She's huffing and you want to slap her hard round the back of her head. Blonde hair, but the stink of bleach about it, black roots coming through and it's straw in your hands. Hold it and pull just a bit too hard, she arches her back and leans both forward and back at the same time. It makes you hit something inside her, some ribbed wall, and all you wanted was a bit of solidity. Just stay there bashing against that wall until your breath hurts.

*Pull out!*

*Not yet*, wait til everything goes blue and red behind your eyes, then it's almost too late and you wrench out, pumping onto the bench and wall.

*Phew*, she spins round and puts one hand on your chest breathing and smiling like she's won. You're pulling your shorts up already and out of the stall before she's even strung her bikini back onto her tits. Go out the changing rooms ignoring the looks from a fat woman holding a little girl's hand. The girl is eating a chocolate ice-cream and suddenly that's all you need.

You go up to the kiosk near the beach, flash your wristband and get three Magnums. That fucking sexy crack of chocolate and it's half-gone by the time you find Jesamy and Jakey in the shallow end. Plop in next to them and hand them the Magnums.

*Cheers. Where've you been?* Jakey asks as he unwraps his.

*Just for a shit.*

Jesamy is going in for that first bite and says through a mouthful of chocolate, *hope you washed your hands* in a way that makes you know she knows. She looks over at where the girls were, but they're packing up and moving away, the alpha somewhere in the middle of them sheltered by all the bags and towels telling the story already that you're barely in.

*Jakey*

They didn't tell me that they were going out until we were in the car home. We were sitting there like the good old days with wet towels down by our feet and trapped water crackling in my ears and the whole world smelling of chlorine. I sighed out with nice heavy limbs looking forward to having the house to ourselves for ten whole days, making tea with them and maybe playing a game of cards in the yard. I wasn't really listening to what they were saying, just letting the air blow warm through the window onto the side of my face. But I caught the words 'time we heading out?' from Jesamy and tuned in.

'Eight-ish? Think it starts at half past.' Ash said back.

I leaned forward. 'Where are we going?'

They shot each other a really quick look and then Ash said, 'sorry kid, it's just us two tonight.'

'What?' I said. 'Where are you going?'

They were quiet.

'Just into town' Jesamy said. 'There's a gig on at CrescentMoon.'

'Who's playing? Why can't I go?' I was so hurt that my voice was higher-pitched than normal.

'Showcase. There's a few on,' Ash said, 'Spank and Alice, Thinstring, some college ones I can't remember.'

'Who else?' I said, just waiting for it.

Ash was still for a second before he said 'The Bones.'

'The fucking *Hurling* Bones?'

Jesamy nodded. I couldn't believe it. The Hurling Bones were our favourite band on the island. I'd seen them play before, and it was the first time I'd been in a mosh pit. They played the kind of songs that made you excited and furious at the same time, and we had a CD of them in the car that we'd played so often that we knew all the words and it was scratched so much that it didn't work anymore.

'Why am I not going?'

'It's ID only, no under-18s.' Ash said.

'Alright then. What about Jesamy?'

They were quiet again. 'They only ID the guys' she replied.

'OK. Well can you not just eyeliner my ID like you did last year?'

'Sorry Jakey. Not this time. We'll be meeting some people that you don't know and it just won't be fun for you.'

'Bullshit' I spat, 'neither of you "know anybody". You just want to be alone, like always. And I'll get in your way. Just do me a favour and tell me to my face instead of lying.'

Ash muttered 'calm down, Jesus. It's just a gig. There'll be others.'

'Yeah. When you've both left and I've got no one to go with. Great.' I'd somehow mixed up about three different hurts: missing the gig, their twinishness, and the fact that they'd be leaving me on my own in a few weeks. I couldn't speak after that without crying, so after a while Ash put Instinct Blues on so loud there was no point even trying.



*Ash*

Jesamy's in the bath for an hour, you're aching for a piss and only two other toilets in the house you can use. You wait outside listening, the sound of her breathing and lavender under the door, she's got a book in there, there's a pile of them on the shelf above the sink fat as bees. You lie down outside the door, no-one in the house but you and her, and Jakey bouncing a ball off the side of the yard-wall. The ball is pissing her off, you know it, but she can't say anything to Jakey, say it and he crumples, his eyes go off somewhere else and you're always a bigger dickhead than him. He shat himself when you said he couldn't go with you tonight, but not after Zeke's, not with this Marcus bullshit. A plane goes overhead and someone's wind-chimes sway outside. She sighs and her feet squeak along the bottom of the bath, the water pushes a little over the sides and then drains off her. She's standing up high now, looking either in the mirror or out of the window. From there you can see a line on the horizon beyond the school and that's where the sea is on a clear day.

She's stepping out and unbolting the door before you can move and flowerdamp air pushes past you, her feet are wet and there's a trail of bubbles down her ankle. She's holding her towel round her in one fist, cheeks blushed up and strands of hair on her neck. *What?* She says when she sees you there and you say something like *we've got to head soon* but you're the one that's been lying outside a bathroom for forty-five minutes and you both know it. She steps round your elbow and walks into her room without looking down and ten minutes later she's dressed.

*You wearing that?* Looking exactly like herself in a t-shirt of Brahms that she painted over to make it look like he's conducting a storm, and her cut-offs and converse with the chain round her ankle. Wet hair no make-up, she smells like insect spray.

*Yeah.*

*Alright.* So you don't bother getting changed at all, just get some cash from the alms box in the kitchen and put your flip-flops on at the door. *My Lady?* offering an arm as you walk down the steps and this she laughs at. *My Lord* and takes it. Jakey still bouncing the ball on the wall as you start the engine but in the rear-view mirror he's standing watching you go.

Approaching the Apocalyptic: An exploration of apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic tropes in relation to *Wire Diamonds*

## 1. Introduction

*Wire Diamonds* was influenced in large part by a constellation of novels by a contemporary cohort of writers that I came to think of, informally, as ‘the disaster women’.<sup>1</sup> This constellation is made up of the following novels: Claire Vaye Watkins’ *Gold Fame Citrus*, Sophie Mackintosh’s *The Water Cure*, Octavia E. Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, Megan Hunter’s *The End We Start From*, Sarah Hall’s *Daughters of the North*, Emily St. John Mandel’s *Station 11*, Sandra Newman’s *The Country of Ice Cream Star*, and Meg Rosoff’s *How I Live Now*. These novels cluster in two key areas. Firstly, each one is written by an author identifying as a woman. Secondly, each one presents a cataclysmic ‘disaster’ reflective of current fears and amplifies it into a dark future around which the author builds a speculative narrative.<sup>2</sup> The novels in the constellation fit, broadly, under the umbrella of science fiction, and align with tropes from sub-genres such as disaster-, speculative-, apocalyptic-, post-apocalyptic-, dystopian-, or climate-fiction (cli-fi).<sup>3</sup>

Throughout this commentary, I will use the terms apocalyptic fiction and post-apocalyptic fiction, and will do so depending on whether the narratives occur during the cataclysm or in the world that follows on from it.<sup>4</sup> The etymology of the word ‘apocalypse’ offers an additional way of understanding the work of such narratives. As Joe Trotta and Houman Sadri point out:

‘[apocalypse] literally means “an uncovering” rather than “catastrophe” or “destruction”; it refers to

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<sup>1</sup> This conception of the ‘constellation’—a starry arrangement of influences occasionally superposed over each other, at once near and far, contingent, non-chronological, all in correspondence with one another, and exerting different pulls at different moments in the creative process—is one that I have borrowed and adapted from Graeme Gilloch’s interpretation of Walter Benjamin’s constellations: ‘the constellation—a figure constituted by a plethora of points which together compose an intelligible, legible, though contingent and transient pattern’. Graeme Gilloch, *Walter Benjamin: Critical Constellations* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002) p. 20; p. 25.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Post-apocalyptic fictions do tend to reflect the most pervasive cultural anxieties of the day’. Erica Sollazzo, “‘The Dead City’: Corporate Anxiety and the Post-Apocalyptic Vision in Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One*’, *Law & Literature*, 29.3 (2017), 457-483, (p. 458); Sarah Hall, one of the ‘disaster women’, says: ‘I suppose dystopia is something we may feel we are experiencing now, to some extent, whether on a social or political or an environmental level...It’s not too much of a leap to transfer that into fiction, to amplify it and imagine the furthest consequences.’ ‘A Conversation with Sarah Hall’ in the postscript of *Daughters of the North*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 2007) p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> For a further exploration of these sub-genres and the innovation within them, the introduction of *Broken Mirrors: Representations of Apocalypses and Dystopias in Popular Culture* ed. by Joe Trotta and others (New York and London: Routledge, 2020) pp. 1-14 serves as an interesting starting point.

<sup>4</sup> In using these labels, I am referring to the secular form of apocalyptic narratives. Elizabeth K Rosen offers a more thorough exploration of the Biblical roots of apocalyptic fiction in the Introduction of her book *Apocalyptic Transformation: Apocalypse and the Postmodern Imagination* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2008) pp. xi-xxxiv. Andrew Tate is also a useful resource with regards to the history of the term: Andrew Tate, *Apocalyptic Fiction* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), pp. 12-22.

a disclosure of knowledge or revelation, usually of something hidden'.<sup>5</sup> A possible irony concerning apocalyptic narratives is that, in them, the cataclysmic event—or series of events— does not completely eradicate human life.<sup>6</sup> Instead, in these bleak futures, the remaining humans are tasked with brute survival. Here, 'humanity is backed up against its limit',<sup>7</sup> and priorities are stripped to the bone; and ethics and morality are suddenly laid bare to the light.<sup>8</sup> Readers can be imaginatively interpellated into these speculative futures 'not completely unlike mercurial deities', by being encouraged to use them as laboratories in which their own conception of humanity can be tested.<sup>9</sup> In her work in *The Post-Apocalyptic Novel in the Twenty-First Century: Modernity Beyond Salvage*, Heather J Hicks teases out the differences between the dystopic and the post-apocalyptic:

The dystopian tradition presents a world in which a *single metanarrative* has been imposed on a society. It is the oppressiveness of *uniformity*—indeed, of a *particularly regimented* expression of modernity—that lies at the heart of the form. Post-apocalypse typically depicts the opposite extreme: a social landscape punctuated by *small communities* adhering to *various micronarratives* [...] *profound uncertainty* in the absence of any points of consensus on which social exchange can safely be predicated.<sup>10</sup>

Always already fracturing and splintering, the plethora of micronarratives within the apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic seem to offer their characters more options, regardless of how flawed or dangerous they may be. There seemed to me to be something creative and freeing about the apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic, especially when compared to the dystopian. Despite the horrors inherent in all of the disasters of 'the disaster women' there was something of the messy nature of the apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic—the sense of the struggle of small bands of people in an inchoate world—that I found more appealing and therefore more common in the literature I was most

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<sup>5</sup> Trotta, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> 'However, in contrast to the biblical precursors, the world in apocalyptic fiction is not factually destroyed and later physically replaced by a paradisiacal new one. As a result, it is not apparent when the state of the end of the world is reached as the literal destruction almost never takes place in apocalyptic fiction.' Martin Hermann, *A History of Fear: British Apocalyptic Fiction, 1895—2011* (Berlin: epubli, 2015), p. 16.

<sup>7</sup> Trotta, p. 16.

<sup>8</sup> Zlatan Filipovic describes Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, as a world in which 'where certainties have come apart, where warrants of law and trappings of morality seem to have been unmasked by life's own metabolism'. Trotta, p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179. Such imagination is absolutely vital, since, as Val Plumwood writes: "If our species does not survive the ecological crisis [...] it will probably be due to our failure to imagine and work out new ways to live with the earth." Plumwood in Niklas Salmose, 'The Apocalyptic Sublime: Anthropocene Representation and Environmental Agency in Hollywood Action-Adventure Cli-Fi Films', *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 51.6 (2018) 1415-1433, (1416).

<sup>10</sup> Heather J. Hicks, *The Post-Apocalyptic Novel in the Twenty-First Century: Modernity Beyond Salvage* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 8. Italics mine for emphasis.

influenced by, rather than the totalitarian suffocation found in the dystopias of, say, Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* series, and Veronica Roth's *Divergent* trilogy.<sup>11</sup>

*Wire Diamonds* is a coming-of-age novel based on an overseas military garrison. It is narrated by three teenage siblings—Ash (18), Jesamy (17) and Jakey (14)—as they spend their last summer together before Ash and Jesamy leave for university. The novel opens when the narrators find a dead man hanging from a ferris wheel. This suicide appears to be connected to a series of seemingly interlinked disasters which occur across the island: a wildfire gets out of control and ends up getting into a naval munitions dump; this triggers a massive explosion which causes the island's main power-station to be destroyed; the local bay is damaged in the resulting oil spill; the garrison is temporarily evacuated, whilst local villages and livelihoods burn in further fires; hospitals, food chains and desalination plants are adversely affected; a drought begins. Protected by the financial and political resources of the military, the siblings remain largely unscathed by the damage being done to the island. Furthermore, and as a result, the question of whether or not this is a conspiracy or merely a series of unfortunate events is immaterial beyond their mild curiosity. Instead, their privilege enables their coming-of-age stories to be amplified by the fraught environment both inside and outside of the garrison's wire, rather than being directly affected by it.<sup>12</sup> When their mother, Malina, chooses to flee her abusive marriage to the siblings' father, they move back to Malina's home-country and thus sidestep the damage and danger of the island.

There are several key themes that *Wire Diamonds* engages with, including bordered land, literary islands, abandoned places and lost things, destruction, coming-of-age-narratives, and wilderness. Here, I will offer close readings of Watkin's *Gold Fame Citrus* (2015) and Mackintosh's *The Water Cure* (2018), with supplementary consideration of the other novels in the constellation, to map out how, through the themes just mentioned, my own work approaches the apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic.

Throughout this critical reflection, I will be necessarily working across the face of numerous adjacent and, in many ways, interconnected, theories. In order to consider literature written by

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<sup>11</sup> Braithwaite writes of these dystopias: 'The social order is often highly structured and controlled, and is usually very hierarchical'. Elizabeth Braithwaite, 'Post-Disaster Fiction for Young Adults: Some Trends and Variations', *Papers: explorations into children's literature*, 20.1 (2010) 5-19 (12).

<sup>12</sup> 'Wire' is a term commonly used in the military to denote the fencing around garrisons.

women, and literature focused on climate-related apocalyptic disaster, it is necessary to consider various aspects of the theories relating to feminism, genre, landscape and environment. It also felt vital to include some sociological consideration of the specific concerns facing military families. There is a particular richness in being able to research across so many disciplinary lines, especially when these can come together to offer a deeper understanding of the novels in question.<sup>13</sup>

## 2. Considering the Constellation

The choice of an all-female group of writers developed organically as a result of a personal project I had engaged in over several years: to make a concerted effort to read fiction written primarily by female authors.<sup>14</sup> This project felt important, not only in questioning or disrupting a wider commercial unconscious (or, indeed, conscious) bias within the industry, but it also seemed personally relevant that I should surround myself with a cohort of female writers whilst writing my first novel.<sup>15</sup> Whilst the scope of this essay does not encompass issues specifically relating to gender difference, I did find some solace in reading novels that, in their characters, issues, and perspectives, understood some fundamentals of my lived experiences. Alice Fishburn, upon undertaking a year-long version of this project herself, writes thusly:

There's a strange sense of relief that comes when you find a writer who understands a fundamental aspect of you. Parts of my own inner life were suddenly echoed or imagined by someone who really, truly got it.<sup>16</sup>

One of the elements that most appealed in the constellation of the 'disaster women' was the way

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<sup>13</sup> There is also a very particular pleasure, almost epicurean, in reading so widely when writing a novel, as this feeds the creative process.

<sup>14</sup> This filtered down from the larger cultural conversation around 2014 onwards, triggered by fellow CHASE writer Joanna Walsh. Alison Flood, 'Readers Prefer Authors of their Own Sex, Survey Finds', *The Guardian* (2014) <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/nov/25/readers-prefer-authors-own-sex-goodreads-survey>> [accessed 13.02.2021] It was not intended to negatively affect my reading for this PhD, to be exclusionary, or to last forever, which would be, as Alice Fishburn puts it: 'short-sighted at best, dangerous at worst'. Alice Fishburn, 'What I Learnt from a Year of Reading Only Books by Women', *Financial Times* (2018) <<https://www.ft.com/content/99936410-fdf8-11e8-aebf-99e208d3e521>> [accessed 15.11.2020]

<sup>15</sup> 'Unconscious bias', Fishburn; A brief example of this bias is that Claire Vaye Watkin's first book *Battleborn* earned her the 'compliment' of being described as someone who 'can write like a man'. She parses this and comes to the conclusion that: 'they meant, *She can write.*' Claire Vaye Watkins, 'On Pandering', *Tin House* (2015) <<https://tinhouse.com/on-pandering/>> [accessed 15.11.2020].

<sup>16</sup> Fishburn.

they individually and collectively considered what it meant to be a woman at the end of the known world. Whilst Peter Heller in *The Dog Stars* and Cormac McCarthy in *The Road* write powerfully and embodiedly of survival at the end of the world, their protagonists are both men.<sup>17</sup> And it is very obvious throughout the novels of ‘the disaster women’ that inhabiting a woman’s body during the apocalypse—when laws have fallen away, new regimes have been imposed, and power has become absolute—is a dangerous position to be in. It seemed obvious that female writers would be ideally positioned to write about vulnerability. Indeed, as Sloane Crosley writes: ‘Who better than a woman to detail the vulnerabilities of characters when cities go dark and tensions run high?’<sup>18</sup> The enormous success of Margaret Atwood, Naomi Alderman, and Emily St. John Mandel set a trend for what Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett calls the ‘new wave of clever feminist dystopian fiction’ within publishing. The sheer popularity of this work alone indicates that there is both the need and the audience for apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic fiction written by women.<sup>19</sup> As Mackintosh says of her novel’s themes:

[...] I don’t think it’s that much of a stretch to imagine a world where you get ill from patriarchy [...] women’s bodies are still very much up for debate. I read an article that said that dystopian feminism was ‘a big trend’, and I thought, ‘It might be a trend, but it’s also our lives’.<sup>20</sup>

In this interview, Mackintosh cites the MeToo movement and the abortion referendum as influences.<sup>21</sup> Sarah Hall, another one of ‘the disaster women’, writes: ‘The female body is still a controversial and hotly debated topic. Issues of motherhood, abortion, sexuality, legal rights, how we should look, and how we should act, are still not truly reconciled’.<sup>22</sup> Many of those writing on post-apocalyptic fiction are in agreement that our present reality contains within it the seeds of its

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<sup>17</sup> Whilst I have read and enjoyed both of these novels, I count neither as an especial or conscious influence in my writing. Reserving this right to influence is something that Watkins writes about in her essay ‘On Pandering’: ‘I will [be]... spending no more of my living breath apologizing for the fact that no, actually, even though I write about the American West, Cormac McCarthy is not a major influence of mine’.

<sup>18</sup> Sloane Crosley, ‘It’s the End of the World as She Knows it’, *The New York Times* (2015) <<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/26/books/review/its-the-end-of-the-world-as-she-knows-it.html>> [accessed 15.11.2020]

<sup>19</sup> Winning variously The Arthur C. Clarke award (Atwood and St. John Mandel), The Man Booker Prize (Atwood), and The Baileys Women’s Prize (Alderman); Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett, ‘The First Book Interview: Sophie Mackintosh: “Dystopian feminism might be a trend, but it’s also our lives”’, *The Guardian* (2018) <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/may/24/sophie-mackintosh-the-water-cure-interview>> [accessed 16.08.2020]

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> ‘A Conversation with Sarah Hall’, p. 4.

own dystopia.<sup>23</sup> As such, this leads to the deep seam of inequality, violence and discrimination against women being reflected in contemporary apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic fiction. This is also an opinion reflected in the literature around apocalyptic fiction by women. Raffaella Baccolini writes that such works address ‘themes such as representation of women and their bodies, reproduction and sexuality, and language and its relation to identity’.<sup>24</sup> We might also do well to consider just how such literature deals with violence. Crosley writes of female authors of apocalyptic fiction: ‘[They] don’t need to destroy the world in order to imagine what it might be like to feel unsafe in it. The threat of violence is not something that’s new to them’.<sup>25</sup> Within the novels of the constellation, their female authors do not shy away from explicitly stating the trauma that is inherent in the possibilities and vulnerabilities of the female body.<sup>26</sup> However, Crosley believes that the fact that violence is a foregone conclusion enables these writers to create more complex and multi-layered stories in comparison to male writers, which encompass both interior and exterior views of the apocalypse.<sup>27</sup> This underlying awareness of violence and a focus on interiority were important influencers in narrating *Wire Diamonds* from Jesamy and Jakey’s perspectives. Whilst they are not personally victims of the island’s disasters, they are still in possession of a vulnerability engendered from being a teenage girl and a young queer boy subject to various form of abuse.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> See Literature Review for references. An interesting intertextual example of this is found in St. John Mandel’s *The Glass Hotel* (2020) which features cameos of characters from *Station 11*: Miranda, who dies of the Georgia Flu, and Leon Prevant whose shipping company was responsible for the overseas spread of the Flu. The infrastructure, characters, greed, and unsustainable practices of global capitalism that led to the devastation of the Georgia Flu of *Station 11* are all present in *The Glass Hotel*. As *New Yorker* writer Katy Waldman expresses it: ‘It is as if the two novels were unspooling in parallel universes.’ Katy Waldman, ‘“The Glass Hotel” Is a Profound Study of Responsibility in Times of Crisis’, *New Yorker* (2020) <<https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-glass-hotel-is-a-profound-study-of-responsibility-in-times-of-crisis>> [accessed 12.02.2021]. The shadows beneath *The Glass Hotel* are reminders that the widespread destruction of *Station 11* could so easily happen and may well still occur; after all, the stage is already set.

<sup>24</sup> Raffaella Baccolini in *Female Rebellion in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction*, ed. by Sara K. Day and others (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), p. 9.

<sup>25</sup> Crosley.

<sup>26</sup> Vulnerability: In a number of the novels, most especially *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Reaper*, *The Country of Ice Cream Star*, and *The Water Cure*, rape and/or the threat of it is embedded into the narratives. Possibility: Lauren Olamina’s baby is taken from her when she is captured and enslaved by a new religious group — Butler; When Ice Cream Star becomes Maria, the foetus she is unaware of is aborted without her consent — Newman; The narrator of *The End We Start From* gives birth as floodwaters rise and then quickly becomes a single parent evacuating cross-country with a nursing child — Hunter; Grace is impregnated by her ‘father’, and the baby is stillborn — Mackintosh; Sister has contraception forcibly implanted in her body and then is coerced into sex afterwards by her husband — Hall.

<sup>27</sup> ‘In the wake of the superfluous and cataclysmic events, male writers tend to jump to that unholy trinity of rape, murder and cannibalism [...] There’s an elegant, streamlined logic to this kind of narrative: Eyes on the prize and the prize is survival. What’s curious is that female writers take an overwhelmingly different—and interior—view of the same landscape.’ Crosley.

<sup>28</sup> There isn’t room within the scope of this critical reflection to go into how gender difference and sexual assault informs my female narrator’s personhood and story, but it is enormously helpful to read writers whose characters experience a similar vulnerability. Watkins writes about her central character Luz—who was sexually assaulted multiple times as a teen model—thus: ‘Though there’s not a plot line about her being sexually assaulted, Luz’s vagina is a liability. And



Both of them have an interiority and awareness of their bodies that Ash lacks, awake to the threats to them through dint of how they are perceived by dangerous others.

Of great interest to me whilst reading was the way that the female characters and narrators of the constellation dealt with the threats to their bodies and lives. Some were armed, to the extent that they felt incomplete without their weapons.<sup>29</sup> Some bodies become canvases of survival.<sup>30</sup> Some underwent programs of mental and physical transformation to step into the embodied power that could turn them into warriors.<sup>31</sup> Some disguised themselves as male or coded away from 'feminine' traits.<sup>32</sup> This initially felt exciting and empowering, offering as it did, 'representations of women which challenge "the male monopoly on power and aggression"'.<sup>33</sup> There was also a focus on women as something other than the 'motivation for the hero's mission'.<sup>34</sup> However, after several versions of this, it began to feel more predictable and potentially problematic, since this course of action relied on a certain body type or personality: active, strong, and physically efficient.<sup>35</sup>

In many ways, there seemed to be the issue of what Susan J. Douglas has called 'embedded feminism', whereby these strong women are embedded into culture in a completely unrealistic way since they have 'a level of command-and-control barely enjoyed by four-star generals, let alone the nation's actual female population'.<sup>36</sup> In this way, activity and strength (or the lack thereof) can be constructed as the 'fault' or 'problem' of the female characters, as if they just need to tap into a hitherto dormant or underutilized power, without due consideration of the factors

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I think that's the case for every woman alive, our culture being what it is—to different extents, depending on a variety of circumstances.' Kyle Mcauley, 'Interrogating the Myth of the American West: An interview with Claire Vaye Watkins', *Vol. 1 Brooklyn*, (2015)

<<http://vol1brooklyn.com/2015/09/28/interrogating-the-myth-of-the-american-west-an-interview-with-claire-vaye-watkins/>> [accessed 13.02.2021].

<sup>29</sup> Kirsten's knives are a 'reassuring weight' on her belt—St. John Mandel, p. 65; When Ice Cream's Kalashnikov is taken from her, her waist becomes 'Kalash's empty place'—Newman, p. 300; when she gets a new rifle, it 'ain't right as my Kalash'. *Ibid.*, p. 335.

<sup>30</sup> Ice Cream considers scars something to brag about — Newman, p. 449; Kristen risks septicaemia from having knives tattooed on her wrist for the number of people she had to kill — St. John Mandel, p. 265; Sister likes and is shocked by her changed body, calling it her 'anima', and 'the anatomy of a fanatic' — Hall, p. 204.

<sup>31</sup> Of her leader's training, Sister says: 'She simply gave us the power to remake ourselves into those inviolable creatures the God of Equality had intended us to be. We knew she was deconstructing the old disabled versions of our sex, and that her ruthlessness was adopted because those constructs were built to endure.' Hall, p. 187.

<sup>32</sup> 'Kindness and nonviolence', according to Martha McCaughey and Neal King, in *Reel Knockouts: Violent Women in Film* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001) p. 2; in Butler's *Parable of the Sower* Olamina disguises herself as a man whilst on the road.

<sup>33</sup> Isabel Santaularia, "'Typescript of the Second Origin" and Current YA Dystopian and Post-Apocalypse Fiction in English: Prefiguring the Female Hero,' *Alambique. Revista académica de ciencia ficción y fantasía/ Jornal académico de ficção científica e fantasia*, 4.2 (2017), 1-20 (p. 4).

<sup>34</sup> Jeffrey A. Brow, 'Gender and the Action Heroine: Hardbodies and the Point of No Return', *Cinema Journal*, 35. 3 (1996), 52-71, (p. 57).

<sup>35</sup> Santaularia, p. 1.

<sup>36</sup> Susan J. Douglas in Santaularia, p. 7.

that might lead to this being an impossibility. The questions that I had relating to these kinds of characterisations were: what happens to those characters who are not, or cannot become, those bodies; are they suited for nothing more than receiving the interminable damage wrought on women; can power only exist on the active, strong, male side of the binary? In response, I wanted to read about women at the heart of narratives who were nevertheless centered in their weakness, their inactivity, their passivity.<sup>37</sup> Much more interesting were the characters who went in an opposite direction to the armed, hard and weaponised bodies. This issue seems to be at the heart of the construction of the female characters and narrators in both *The Water Cure* and *Gold Fame Citrus*.

*Gold Fame Citrus* follows narrative conventions of current apocalyptic narratives by accelerating or exaggerating existing fears and speculating about a dark future in which the environment is crumbling. In this case, the action centres around what happens when California runs out of water. Set initially in a drought-stricken and flammable Los Angeles, *Gold Fame Citrus* follows young former-model Luz, her boyfriend Ray, and Ig—the apparently parentless child at risk from sex trafficking that they took from a rave and ‘adopted’—as they go in search of a more temperate place to live. They attempt to drive out to the dune sea, the Amargosa, where it is rumoured there is a desert town with a water dowser. When their gas runs out in the desert, Ray goes in search of help and does not return. Luz and Ig are found dying of dehydration by members of the town, and Luz is slowly drawn closer into the orbit of its cult-like dowser/leader, Levi.

*The Water Cure* is the story of three sisters—Lia, Skye, and Grace—who are ‘kept safe’ from the poisonous water and toxic world outside their island by their parents: Mother and King. The novel charts the events that unfold when King disappears, and three men are washed ashore. Although it does concern a seemingly irredeemably damaged environment, Mackintosh’s novel is perhaps less explicit than *Gold Fame Citrus* in its approach to the blasted post-apocalyptic landscape. Elements of cataclysmic climate change are there in the hyper-salinated water, toxic skies and saturating heat of the island, but by far the greater threat to the girls is men, who, in this

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<sup>37</sup> McCaughey and King, p. 2; This binary structure situates men as active, women as passive; men as violent, women as having violence done to them. Brow, p. 52.

new world, hold a contagion that is lethal to women. It is unclear how any of these disasters occurred, since, as Cosslett writes, Mackintosh has ‘dispensed with exposition’.<sup>38</sup> Mackintosh has said in interview that she was less interested in world-building in *The Water Cure* than she was in the people, and in this she corresponds with Crosley’s belief, above, that her approach to the apocalypse is more interior; concerned more with her narrators’ understanding and feelings towards what is happening rather than offering a more omniscient overview of how this particular apocalypse operates.<sup>39</sup> The reader’s view of this damaged world is restricted by the deeply interior first-person narratives of each sister (and the disconcerting plural first-person narrations they sometimes take).<sup>40</sup> The novel explores in some great detail the sisters’ cultic relationships to each other, their parents, and the men who pursue them.<sup>41</sup> From the outset, *The Water Cure* plays with a vacillating sense of the post-apocalyptic, and, as the story progresses, it is revealed that the sisters have grown up not as survivors of the apocalypse, but rather as captives of Mother and King; subject to startling emotional, physical, and—in the case of Grace—sexual abuse. The contagion of the outside world is, in fact, a fiction designed to keep them trapped. Even their island is not really an island in the geographic sense—being part of the mainland beyond its fence.

Whilst both novels fall more into the post-apocalyptic category rather than the dystopic (and thus have more choices or courses of potential action), the female narrators are still subject to the power structures of their environments.<sup>42</sup> For instance, in *Gold Fame Citrus* Luz is still at the mercy of a world that sees her as a racialized Other, bearing the legacy of her father’s fundamentalist Christian beliefs and multiple sexual abuses by men in power. She is still living in a West ruined by

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<sup>38</sup> Cosslett.

<sup>39</sup> Claire Armitstead, ‘Interview—Sophie Mackintosh: “Suddenly I really wanted a baby—I resented that it felt outside my control”’, *The Guardian* (2020) <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/sep/05/sophie-mackintosh-suddenly-i-really-wanted-a-baby-i-resented-that-it-felt-outside-my-control>> [accessed 13.02.2021]; Crosley; This is also a phenomenon observed by Murphy, who considers the apocalypse a metaphor of Limits discourse ‘generally used as a way to introduce a new story without the burden, at least initially, of a complex backstory.’ p. 47.

<sup>40</sup> Of this ‘chorus voice’, Mackintosh says she was partly inspired by Jeffrey Eugenides’ *The Virgin Suicides*, which was also influential when I was creating my teenage sibling’s narrative voices. Sophie Mackintosh, ‘Accepting Enigmas: Sophie Mackintosh Interviewed by Leah Dworkin’, *Bomb Magazine* (2019) <<https://bombmagazine.org/articles/accepting-enigmas-sophie-mackintosh-interviewed/>> [accessed 07.11.2020]

<sup>41</sup> Throughout, by ‘cult’ or ‘cultic’ I refer not to the ‘more neutral historical meaning of the term from the sociology of religion’ but to a modern interpretation to mean ‘manipulative and authoritarian groups which allegedly employ mind control and pose a threat to mental health’. James T. Richardson, ‘Definitions of Cult: From Sociological-Technical to Popular-Negative’, *Review of Religious Research*, 34.4 (1993), 348-356 (p.348); Robbins and Anthony in Richardson, p.351.

<sup>42</sup> See Hicks (2016), p. 8.

a ‘masculine-coded drive’ towards domination over nature.<sup>43</sup> The sisters of *The Water Cure* are still irredeemably altered and brainwashed by their parents and their isolation. They still bear the mental and physical scars of abusive rituals and malnutrition. The representation of these female characters as something other than what Isabel Santaularia terms ‘improbable heroines’, lends an element of realism to these speculative worlds, and also allows for a more multi-layered, complex and interior examination of what it means to be a woman at the end of the world.<sup>44</sup> These characters centred in their vulnerabilities were very useful when thinking through the construction of *Wire Diamond*’s female narrator, Jesamy. Whilst she is clever, emotionally controlled and capable of great brutality, her strength is not physical; she is not the ‘hardbody, hardware, hard-as-nails heroine’.<sup>45</sup>

In both Mackintosh’s *The Water Cure* and Watkin’s *Gold Fame Citrus*, the climate carries a large part of the apocalyptic threat of the narratives, in terms of their environments being dangerous or even fatal to the characters. At the heart of *The Water Cure* is the idea of toxicity: the environment is toxic and is implicitly intertwined with the fact that men are now dangerously toxic to women.<sup>46</sup> In *Gold Fame Citrus*, disaster is more explicitly related to drought. In most, if not all, of the other novels by ‘the disaster women’, climate change and disaster are also front-and-centre in the narratives. The focus on climate change is a ‘major trend’ in publishing, and this is no surprise, considering that apocalyptic fiction is reflective of ‘the predominant cultural anxieties of their time’.<sup>47</sup> Zlatan Filipovic states that ‘there is an argument to suggest that the current global uncertainty about the sustainability of our current rates of emission and arguable abuse of the climate has led to a rise in this type of apocalyptic and dystopian narrative over the past years’.<sup>48</sup> With the ‘fingerprints of climate change’ all over the wildly destructive Australian bushfires, and the Covid-19 pandemic linked directly to the ‘human impact on wildlife’, it seems that fiction concerned

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<sup>43</sup> Heather J. Hicks, “‘Smoke Follows Beauty’: The Femme Fatale and the Logic of Apocalyptic Affiliation in Claire Vaye Watkins’s *Gold Fame Citrus*”, *ASAP/Journal*, 3.3 (2018), 623-651 (p. 641).

<sup>44</sup> Santaularia, p. 7.

<sup>45</sup> Brow, p. 52.

<sup>46</sup> As part of the psychological games of Mother and King, this toxicity—how it developed, and its wider ramifications to the world outside of the island—is not explained to the sisters (and therefore the reader).

<sup>47</sup> ‘Major trend’: Matthew Schneider-Mayerson, ‘The Influence of Climate Fiction: An Empirical Survey of Readers’, *Environmental Humanities*, 10.2 (2018), 473-500 (p. 473); ‘Cultural anxieties’: Hermann, p. 5.

<sup>48</sup> Trotta, p. 8.

with humanity urging its own end by destroying non-human life closely mirrors our current reality.<sup>49</sup>

Indeed, some theorists believe that apocalyptic fictions have several positive functions: by reflecting current anxieties, they can serve as ‘clarion warning’<sup>50</sup> that demands ‘a change in behaviour or attitude’.<sup>51</sup> After all, they are a step into our own future by tracking our current trajectory across time. As Trotta puts it: ‘[...] ominous stories of the future allow us to explore what could happen if certain present-day trends were to continue in potentially dangerous directions’.<sup>52</sup> Even the particular ways that climate disasters occur in the narratives can also be informative. For her part, Judith Curry has stated that ‘scientists and other people are trying to get their message across about various aspects of the climate change issue [...] fiction is an untapped way of doing this—a way of smuggling some serious topics into the consciousness of readers’.<sup>53</sup> This is an urgent task, since, as Ariel Kahn reminds us: ‘In contemporary popular culture, the dystopian and post-apocalyptic genres are coming perilously close to normative realism’.<sup>54</sup>

Fundamental to my understanding of apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic fiction was Joe Trotta, Zlatan Filipovic and Houman Sadri’s 2020 edited collection of essays: *Broken Mirrors: Representations of Apocalypses and Dystopias in Popular Culture*. Their interdisciplinary focus, tracing an apocalyptic aesthetic across multiple forms of culture, was a vital source when grappling with a novel whose inspiration was a many-tendrilled thing. It was also from them that I came to understand the term ‘apocalyptic’ (as explored in the Introduction), and this was corroborated across the body of literature on apocalyptic narratives.<sup>55</sup> Many of the authors in *Broken Mirrors* were in accordance on another key issue of apocalyptic narratives, which was that, rather than existing in a fantasy land apart from the realities of the worlds they were written in, they tended to be reflective of the cultural anxieties of their time.<sup>56</sup> This sentiment was echoed by other writers

<sup>49</sup> ‘Fingerprints’: Tara Law, ‘Australia’s Wildfires and Climate Change Are Making One Another Worse in a Vicious, Devastating Circle’, *Time* (2020) <<https://time.com/5759964/australian-bushfires-climate-change/>> [accessed 26.05.2020]; ‘Covid-19’: John Vidal, ‘Human impact on wildlife to blame for spread of viruses, says study’, *The Guardian*, (2020) <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/apr/08/human-impact-on-wildlife-to-blame-for-spread-of-viruses-says-study-aoe>> [accessed 26.05.2020]

<sup>50</sup> Naomi Klein, ‘Dystopian Fiction’s Popularity Is a Warning Sign for the Future’, *Wired*, (2014) <<https://www.wired.com/2014/12/geeks-guide-naomi-klein/>> [accessed 10.10.2018]

<sup>51</sup> Hermann, p. 6.

<sup>52</sup> Trotta, p. 179.

<sup>53</sup> Judith Curry, in Schneider-Mayerson, p. 475, fn10.

<sup>54</sup> Trotta, p. 46.

<sup>55</sup> Tate, p. 12; De Cristofaro, p. 3; Hicks, (2016) p. 4; Hermann, p. 2.

<sup>56</sup> Trotta and Sadri p. 2; Zlatan Filipovic, p. 13; Michael Godhe, p. 35. All within *Broken Mirrors*.

such as Erica Sollazzo, Raffaella Baccolini, Martin Hermann and Martin Walter.<sup>57</sup> Adding credence to this idea is the important point made by Susan Watkins that, however dark the post-apocalypse might be, a wholesale belief that the pre-apocalypse was positive is a privileged stance, since it was a system built on 'patriarchal and imperialist norms'.<sup>58</sup> This stance is vital to an understanding of the novels of 'the disaster women' since they are at times extremely critical of the 'before-times', and their characters, in Butler's novels especially, seek a new way of living and flourishing in the post-apocalypse, rather than pining for a return to the pre-disaster past.

There is a belief, again, across a broad section of writers on apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic narratives, that there is a certain aesthetic prevalent throughout the genre. Martin Walter, in his chapter 'Landscapes of loss: the semantics of empty spaces in contemporary post-apocalyptic fiction' believes that this includes uncanny, abandoned places, where a kind of emptiness seems to contain the threat of aggressive others.<sup>59</sup> Patrick D. Murphy adds to this sites of ransacking and looting.<sup>60</sup> Also demonstrative of cataclysm is the ruination of iconic places, as according to Vera Benczik in her chapter 'The City in Ruins: Post-9/11 Representations of Cataclysmic New York on Film' and Miles Orvell in his essay 'Urban Ruins and the Destructive Sublime'.<sup>61</sup> Orvell's essay introduces the concept of the destructive sublime, 'a new category of visual representation' that takes into account both aesthetic depictions of disaster, but also the response to such images.<sup>62</sup> It is his belief that this response 'combines moral and ethical revulsion with aesthetic wonder and awe'.<sup>63</sup> In this, he aligns with a Romantic sense of the sublime—taken from the Latin *sublimis*, meaning 'up to the threshold', and used to describe something 'too immense physically or conceptually to be mentally grasped in its entirety'.<sup>64</sup> Niklas Salmose in his work on the images of

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<sup>57</sup> Erica Sollazzo, p. 458; Raffaella Baccolini (2003), p. 115; Hermann, p. 5.

Martin Walter, 'Landscapes of loss: the semantics of empty spaces in contemporary post-apocalyptic fiction', *Empty Spaces: Perspectives on emptiness in modern history*, ed. by Courtney J. Campbell and others (University of London Press, Institute of Historical Research, 2019) pp.133—50 (p. 139); Hermann, p. 6.

<sup>58</sup> Susan Watkins, *Contemporary Women's Post-Apocalyptic Fiction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020) p. 7.

<sup>59</sup> Walter.

<sup>60</sup> Murphy, p. 47.

<sup>61</sup> Vera Benczik, 'The City in Ruins: Post-9/11 Representations of Cataclysmic New York on Film', *Utopian Horizons Book Subtitle: Ideology, Politics, Literature*, ed. by Zsolt Czigányik (Central European University Press, 2017) 201-218; Miles Orvell, 'Photographing Disaster: Urban Ruins and the Destructive Sublime', *American Studies* 58.4, (2013) 647-671.

<sup>62</sup> Orvell, p. 647.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> 'The Sublime' in *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of British Literature*, ed. by David Scott Kastan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) <<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195169218.001.0001/acref-9780195169218-e-0453>> [accessed 02.07.2020].

destruction in apocalyptic cinema, also believes that there is a 'very sublime interplay between awe and horror.'<sup>65</sup> He argues that the apocalyptic sublime, particularly with regard to action scenes, incorporates the viewer (or, in the case of this essay, the reader) into the action through their embodied identification with the protagonists.<sup>66</sup>

Prevalent within images of destruction is the concept of a 'renascent nature', with recognisable objects of the before-times made unfamiliar or unusable (such as highways and roads) by a rewilding.<sup>67</sup> With this dramatic change of infrastructure can come a loss of connectivity, and dispersed human bands, such as Hicks believes are key trope of the post-apocalypse.<sup>68</sup> Tied into this thinking is an environmental perspective, especially since (as noted in the Introduction), the catastrophes in the novels of 'the disaster women' are related to the environment and the parlous effects of human mismanagement and the pursuit of gain over all else. Various thinkers have informed the perspective taken in this essay, especially when considering the positioning of humans in relation to their environment. Anne Whiston Spirn, Robert Macfarlane, Dominick Tyler and Lawrence Buell all consider that the human damage to the environment can be attributed to a loss of connection with nature (especially with regards to its complexity and specificity), both physically and linguistically.<sup>69</sup> Buell quotes Wendell Berry: 'without a complex knowledge of one's place, and without the faithfulness to one's place on which such knowledge depends, it is inevitable that the place will be used carelessly, and eventually destroyed',<sup>70</sup> or, as Paul McGillick phrases it, 'endure it, exploit it and then get out'.<sup>71</sup> This can lead to concepts of wilderness, for example, which Kylie Crane, Britta Kühlenbeck, and Robert Macfarlane believe is far from a neutral term, instead containing a colonial history and represented as the antagonistic antithesis of order and production.<sup>72</sup> A way of attempting to halt or repair some of the human-wrought damage

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<sup>65</sup> Salmose, p. 1423.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1421.

<sup>67</sup> Phillip R. Polefrone, 'Ecology Without Us: Ecological Succession and History in Earth Abides', *Extrapolation*, 59.3 (2018), 255-280 (p. 259).

<sup>68</sup> Heather J. Hicks, *The Post-Apocalyptic Novel in the Twenty-First Century: Modernity Beyond Salvage* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 8; p. 6.

<sup>69</sup> Anne Whiston Spirn, *The Language of Landscape* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 11; Dominick Tyler, *Uncommon Ground* (London: Guardian Faber Publishing; 2015) pp. 3-4; Macfarlane, p. 10.

<sup>70</sup> Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005) p. 78.

<sup>71</sup> McGillick, in Kühlenbeck, p. 223.

<sup>72</sup> Kylie Crane, 'A Place in the Wilderness? Tim Winton's *Dirt Music* and Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*', in *Territorial Terrors: Contested Spaces in Colonial and Postcolonial Writings* ed. by Gerhard Stütz (Königshausen & Neumann: Würzburg, 2007) pp. 71-85 (p. 73); Britta Kühlenbeck, 'Old Space and New Place: The Pilbara', Special Issue of *Coolabah*, 11, (2013) 205-226 (p. 220-1); Robert Macfarlane, *The Wild Places* (London: Granta, 2008), p. 30; L.

that has been done is considered by many thinkers (including Jane Bennett, Tim Winton, and William Henry Searle) to acknowledge human kinship with nature and behave accordingly.<sup>73</sup> Bennett believes that we are inextricably tangled up in the environment, with elements of non-humanity such as bacteria, weather, metal and food behaving towards us as ‘actants more than objects’.<sup>74</sup> Being bound up as we are with nature and non-human entities necessitates us paying attention to the land as if it were, as Searle states, ‘a loved one’,<sup>75</sup> or, as Winton names it, ‘kith and kin’.<sup>76</sup> This involves seeing the land as something important, interconnected, even sacred, in its own right without the urge towards ownership.<sup>77</sup> Searle describes this process as ‘the long walk back home’.<sup>78</sup>

Linked to environmental concerns or infrastructure break-down, many novels within the genre feature the concept of Survivalism or—as used in this essay—Limits discourse. Based on ideas stemming from Malthusian roots, especially Garrett Hardin’s 1968 article ‘The Tragedy of the Commons’, it posits that population growth is exponential whilst resources are finite and that ‘Freedom in a commons brings ruin to all.’<sup>79</sup> This is an idea that has seen take up in environmental sciences, and it is applicable to apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic fiction which sees severe scarcity caused by catastrophic events. Murphy argues that scarcity (of finite food and resources) plays a key role in shaping human and political relations within apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic narratives.<sup>80</sup> From this, the idea of control and security is allowed to flourish in the defense and allocation of resources in such narratives, and with it the creation of an ‘us’ and an ‘Other’. So, too, can develop other ideas such as the ‘lifeboat’; a metaphor described elsewhere in Hardin’s work as a

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Buell: ‘What the first European settlers of North America saw as primordial or “empty” space, and what their descendants persist in thinking of as “wilderness”, had been somebody’s else’s place since the first human arrived millennia before—and much longer than that, if we allow nonhumans to count as “somebodies”.’ p. 67.

<sup>73</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 2010) p. 116; Tim Winton, *Island Home: A Landscape Memoir* (London: Picador, 2016), p. 19, 23-4, 92-3; William Henry Searle, *Threads* (London: Penguin Random House, 2019) p. 1.

<sup>74</sup> Bennett, p. 115.

<sup>75</sup> Searle, p. 113.

<sup>76</sup> Tim Winton, *Island Home: A Landscape Memoir* (London: Picador, 2016), p. 23-4

<sup>77</sup> Tyler, p. 5

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2

<sup>79</sup> Garrett Hardin, ‘The Tragedy of the Commons’, *Science*, 162.3859 (1968) 1243-1248 (1244).

<sup>80</sup> Patrick D. Murphy, ‘Lessons from the Zombie Apocalypse in Global Popular Culture: An Environmental Discourse Approach to the Walking Dead’, *Environmental Communication*, 12.1 (2018) 44-57 (p. 47)

He writes of the post-event landscape of the zombie apocalypse, but it could be argued that the zombie apocalypse bears strong thematic links to other apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic narratives that do not involve flesh-eating marauders. Cannibalism is, after all, not as taboo in the post-apocalypse, and it indicates viscerally an up-ending of an established order that holds cannibalism away from acceptable human behaviour. Within the constellation, there are instances of it in Butler’s *Parable of the Sower*, p. 256.



comparatively wealthy country with limited capacity which, in offering aid to poorer countries, would capsize.<sup>81</sup> Janet Fiskio, in writing about 'lifeboat' theory, traces it to eugenicist ideas and argues that it is based on 'a politics of exclusion', and of certain types of bodies at that.<sup>82</sup> This melds into ideas of borders and their permeability, through the idea that a border could protect resources and prevent threats to their security from 'Others'. Although Dolores Herrero, in her article 'Post-Apocalypse Literature in the Age of Unrelenting Borders and Refugee Crises', doesn't explicitly mention the 'lifeboat' theory, she does help expand the idea of an 'us' and 'Other' mentality which posits that some find borders far easier to transcend than others.<sup>83</sup> She writes especially movingly of those attempting to migrate to Australia, who have to contend with 'exclusionary identity, discrete binaries and forbidding borders'.<sup>84</sup> Dora Apel, too, addresses how badly peripatetic migrants fare at the hands of resident populations.<sup>85</sup>

Around and about the apocalyptic are interleaved other genres, especially the coming-of-age narrative, or *Bildungsroman*.<sup>86</sup> More broadly, Sarah Graham, Kenneth Millard and Ellen McWilliams outline the tropes common to *Bildungsroman*, which are: freedom (or lack thereof); puberty; sexual consent; alcohol; gaining a driving license (and, extrapolated from this, a sense of freedom of movement); moments of crisis; relationship to the father (as a symbol of authority); and leaving home.<sup>87</sup> Andrew Tate's 2017 book *Apocalyptic Fiction* was a key resource when investigating the way in which dystopian narratives are fertile ground for coming-of-age stories. He argues that adults tend to be dangerous or equivocal in these narratives, and that children must therefore learn to protect and nurture themselves. In a similar way, Elizabeth Braithwaite argues

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<sup>81</sup> Garrett Hardin, 'Living in a lifeboat', in G. Hardin & J. Baden (Eds.), *Managing the commons* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1977) pp. 261—279.

<sup>82</sup> Janet Fiskio, 'Apocalypse and Ecotopia: Narratives in Global Climate Change Discourse', *Race, Gender & Class*, 19.1/2 (2012) 12-36 (p. 20); it is especially problematic that Hardin cites the US in his metaphor, since he is bemoaning immigration policies that are 'suicidal' for the commons, and thus forgetting or omitting the genocidal history of the country.

<sup>83</sup> Dolores Herrero, 'Post-Apocalypse Literature in the Age of Unrelenting Borders and Refugee Crises: Merlinda Bobis and Australian Fiction', *Interventions*, 19.7 (2017), 948-961.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 952; She quotes a 2016 Refugee Council of Australia report which states that migrants face a policy of 'offshore processing' which puts them at risk of severe delays to entry, sexual abuse (especially within the LGBTQ+ community), self-harm, insufficient medical care leading to death, and even self-immolation. *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> Dora Apel, *Beautiful Terrible Ruins: Detroit and the Anxiety of Decline* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015) p. 145

<sup>86</sup> For the sake of this essay, where writers have used the term *Bildungsroman*, I take it to refer to 'coming-of-age' narratives within works of fiction. The rich untranslate-ability of the term *Bildungsroman* is explored in Sarah Graham, *A History of the Bildungsroman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019) pp. 2-3.

<sup>87</sup> Freedom - Graham, p. 8; Puberty, sexual consent, alcohol, driving - Millard p 5; father - Millard p. 15; crisis, leaving home - Ellen McWilliams, *Margaret Atwood and the Female Bildungsroman* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009) p. 20.

that there is an additional demand: adolescents must strive to build a better world than their forebears (which it seems is reflected frequently in YA dystopian fiction).<sup>88</sup> Other writers (such as Sara K Day, Balaka Basu, Katherine Broad, and Carrie Hintz) believe that there is a coincidence of trauma and turmoil in dystopian fiction, which is mirrored in the Bildungsroman.<sup>89</sup> Lynda Ng sees in coming-of age narratives a struggle between restraint and freedom, which, in narratives of dark or unfair futures can lead to that rebellion and resistance that Sara K Day believes is prevalent in YA dystopian fiction.<sup>90</sup> This scholarship is especially interesting when looking at how my own work interleaves with the apocalyptic—since my narrators are all teenagers and coming-of-age in their own ways—and yet I would not place *Wire Diamonds* in the category of YA fiction.

A crucial element of the research behind this critical reflection was reading interviews with the authors themselves, as they address important themes of their own novels. Rosoff discusses the ‘YA’ label that *How I Live Now* gained and her uncertainty around this, which aided my thinking through my own target audience; Hunter explains the effect of Rosoff’s novel on the positioning of her own characters at the periphery of the apocalyptic action in *The End We Start From*, which was influential on the way I positioned my own characters via their privilege; Hall and Mackintosh expand on the culture of misogyny their books sprang from, which had direct links to the way I wrote the misogyny of the garrison setting of my novel; and Watkins critiques the Manifest Destiny which led to the American West of her novel, which helped me think through *Wire Diamond’s* contested and abused landscape.

Since *Wire Diamonds* is narrated by siblings living within the military milieu of an overseas garrison, it was necessary to involve literature about military families. There is a unifying trend across my reading that states that mobility is a key feature of the lives of those within the system.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Elizabeth Braithwaite “The hope—the one hope—is that your generation will prove wiser and more responsible than mine:” constructions of guilt in a selection of disaster texts for young adults’, *Barnboken*, 35 (2012) 1-12.

<sup>89</sup> *Female Rebellion in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction*, ed. by Sara K. Day and others (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016) p. 7; Balaka Basu, Katherine R. Broad and Carrie Hintz (eds.), *Contemporary Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults: Brave New Teenagers* (New York: Routledge, 2013) p. 7.

<sup>90</sup> Lynda Ng, ‘Fixing to die: Kazuo Ishiguro’s reinvention of the Bildungsroman’, *Textual Practice*, 34.12, (2020) 2167-2183 (p.2170); Day, p. 3.

<sup>91</sup> Molly Clever and David R. Segal, ‘The Demographics of Military Children and Families’, *The Future of Children*, 23.2 (2013) 13-39 (20, 26); Victoria Williamson, Sharon A. M. Stevelink, Eve Da Silva & Nicola T. Fear, ‘A systematic review of wellbeing in children: a comparison of military and civilian families’, *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health*, 12.1, (2018) 1-12 (p.1); Sue Jervis, *Relocation, Gender, and Emotion: A Psycho-Social Perspective on the Experiences of Military Wives* (Routledge, 2011); Helen Bruce and Emma Neva Banister, ‘Army wives’ consumer vulnerability and communities of coping’, *European Journal of Marketing*, 54.11, (2019) 2849—2871 (p. 1) (pagination differs behind paywall); Kimberly J. Vannest, Kelly M. Carrero, Brenda Patience, Georgette Price, Rob Altmann, April Haas & Stacey Smith, ‘Military-Connected Adolescents’ Emotional and Behavioral Risk Status: Comparisons of

It is acknowledged that there could be negative effects on the spouses and children of personnel due to the unique set of challenges presented by a military lifestyle.<sup>92</sup> However, despite that, there appears to be serious gaps in research on the families of those serving, especially children.<sup>93</sup> Even within the research on military children, there is a key focus on the effects of deployment of a family member on spouses and children, which has less relevance to my work since the siblings of *Wire Diamonds* are not placed in that situation.<sup>94</sup> Historian and former Army child Clare Gibson's book *Army Childhood: British Army Children's Lives and Times* addressed some of the research gaps due to its specificity, and the author's autobiographical link to the subject.<sup>95</sup> It was from Gibson's book that I furthered my concept of the siblings as tourists. By looking very slightly outside of the strictly military milieu, I found that Kathleen Gilbert's 2008 article on 'Loss and Grief Between and Among Cultures: The Experience of Third Culture Kids' was an especially pertinent study on the particular complex grief experienced by those children subjected to relentless relocations and lives spent across cultures.<sup>96</sup> In addition to this, when writing *Wire Diamonds* I relied heavily on my own lived experience of a childhood 'behind the wire' of multiple overseas military bases. Having lived in five countries, twelve houses, and gone to eight schools before the age of eighteen, I certainly felt well-placed to speak to the particular psychological mechanisms presented by peripatetic military children.

Since *The Water Cure* heavily explores cultic control and abuse, I also needed a deeper understanding of how cults maintain control over their members. Steven Hassan is a former cult member and is now an exit-counsellor for those who were in cults. His peer-reviewed article, jointly-authored with Mansi Shah, 'The anatomy of undue influence used by terrorist cults and traffickers to induce helplessness and trauma, so creating false identities' provided a key base for my interpretation of how the sisters of *The Water Cure* are trapped in their cultic family system. Two other books deserve a mention, since they were instrumental whilst I was conceptualising

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Universal Screening Data and National Norms', *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 30, (2021) 134—145 (p. 134).

<sup>92</sup> S. L. Rowe, M. Keeling, S. Wessely, and N. T. Fear, 'Perceptions of the impact a military career has on children', *Occupational Medicine*, 64.7, (2014) 490—496 (p.496); Clever and Segal, p. 28.

<sup>93</sup> Bruce and Bannister, p. 5 (pagination differs behind paywall); N. Park, 'Military Children and Families: Strengths and Challenges During Peace and War', *The American Psychologist*, 66.1, (2011) 65—72; Clever and Segal, p. 32.

<sup>94</sup> Vannest and others, p. 134.

<sup>95</sup> Clare Gibson, *Army Childhood: British Army Children's Lives and Times* (Oxford: Shire Publications, 2012); Gibson also founded The Army Children Archive: <http://www.archhistory.co.uk/>

<sup>96</sup> Gilbert Kathleen R., 'Loss and Grief Between and Among Cultures: The Experience of Third Culture Kids', *Illness, Crisis & Loss*, 16.2, (2008) 93-109.

various geo-political spaces within *Wire Diamonds*, such as the line, the buffer zone, and the island's militarized zones. Yael Navaro-Yashin writes about the internationally unrecognised Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus in *The Make-Believe Space: Affective Geography in a Postwar Polity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012). Navaro-Yashin, a Jewish Istanbuli, occupies an 'inside-outside' position within her research area, since she is married to a Turkish Cypriot, and this was an especially interesting stance as the characters of *Wire Diamonds* live in the liminal zone of the garrison; almost but not quite part of the island. Jon Calame and Esther Charlesworth's book *Divided Cities: Belfast, Beirut, Jerusalem, Mostar, and Nicosia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009) was also a vitally useful investigation into contested space, especially considering the attention it pays to outside powers and their vested interests in civil conflict, suggesting that 'Western politicians are not above exploiting religious differences to disguise neocolonial ambitions'.<sup>97</sup> Additionally, it had helpful critique of the creation of borders in the name of 'security' and the creation of an 'us' and a 'them'.<sup>98</sup>

### 3. Borders, Scarcity and Lifeboats.

Colonies, borders, bases, garrisons, camps, and barbed wire fences. Just as in reality, post-apocalyptic fiction has places that are exclusive and bounded.<sup>99</sup> These encampments range from the provisional to the heavily armoured and are designed with a view to protect an 'us' from an undesirable Other.<sup>100</sup> Access to these areas is conditional, and these conditions change depending on the story logic of the narrative.<sup>101</sup> Within every novel in the small group that I am examining there is some kind of border demarcating a place to which only some people have access. These borders take many forms but are exclusively designed in a pursuit of control over resources and safety.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Jon Calame and Esther Charlesworth, *Divided Cities: Belfast, Beirut, Jerusalem, Mostar, and Nicosia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009) p. vii.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. vii-viii.

<sup>99</sup> Watkins in *Gold Fame Citrus* describes this phenomenon with the metaphor of 'circled wagons'. p. 62. which conjures a trope of Westerns: the 'wagon train sagas beset by swarms of attacking Indians', Walter, p.143.

<sup>100</sup> Herrero, p. 955.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 953.

<sup>102</sup> *How I live Now* almost entirely militarises the countryside; the children in *The Country of Ice Cream Star* live in

As mentioned above, a Limits discourse is concerned with scarcity, or the fear of scarcity. If embedded within the concept of scarcity there is an ‘emphasis on competition and conflict’, then, Murphy says, ‘control and security are essential’ in preventing overconsumption.<sup>103</sup> In order to create the kind of control and security necessary to protect these finite resources, boundaries are needed, along with a military (or, indeed, a militia) to defend them.

A second concept, that of the ‘lifeboat’, is also something that emerges from Limits discourse, and conceptualises a safe(r) space to which people can escape from whatever collapse is affecting them. However, the image of a lifeboat creates issues around access, since ‘the lifeboat can only contain so many people before it capsizes’.<sup>104</sup> This then allows for inequality to flourish through the regulation of who is included and who is excluded. In this context, this is often a deciding factor in who lives and who dies. Elite power holders must make these choices, and decide who is an ‘us’, and who is an ‘Other’.<sup>105</sup> It is Murphy’s belief that, in the process of these decisions, ‘colonial relations and “civilizing” histories’ are evoked.<sup>106</sup> And again, as with the concept of scarcity, a military or militia presence is required to enforce such decisions.<sup>107</sup>

The most concise description of the scarcity of Limits discourse comes within Hunter’s *The End We Start From* when the narrator’s husband (R) and her parents-in-law go out on a routine food-shop and come back without her mother-in-law, (G):

‘Too many, R says. Too little’.<sup>108</sup>

This refers directly to Murphy’s ‘competition and conflict’ over resources; on the one hand, the threat in there being ‘too many’ people and, on the other, ‘too little’ in terms of resources—in this case food.<sup>109</sup> Later, the narrator thinks of what happened to G:

‘Panic. Crush. G. Panicked. Crushed’.<sup>110</sup>

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variously defended tribal encampments; *Station 11* has the cult town of St. Deborah by the Water and Severn City airport; *Daughters of the North* features a hilly encampment strictly restricted to orders of warrior women.

<sup>103</sup> Murphy, p. 48.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid, p. 48-9; Herrero, p. 955.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 48-9.

<sup>108</sup> Hunter, p. 16.

<sup>109</sup> Murphy, p. 48.

<sup>110</sup> Hunter, p. 21.

Hunter's deceptively sparse prose captures the breathless reality of G, caught between her need for radically limited resources, and the multiple others who also need the same resources, being crushed to death in her pursuit for groceries. With the simple fact of scarcity, contemporary England is pushed over into apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic territory. On the next trip out, R returns two weeks later without his father:

'Here are some of R's words for what happened: tussle, squabble, slaughter.'<sup>111</sup> Again, R loses a parent in a looting scenario. The way this sentence is structured—the words 'tussle' and 'squabble' seeming domestic and lighthearted before being followed by 'slaughter'—demonstrates how simple it is in apocalyptic England to go from a skirmish in a shop to being slaughtered in a competition for food. This frightening summation of the effects of panic-buying or looting leads to the narrator, her husband and her baby son leaving straight away and driving north to the border. The country beyond the border (Scotland) seems safer and with more essential resources because of its distance from the flooded South, and thus functions as a kind of a lifeboat that southern refugees are desperate to get into. Almost immediately scarcity flows organically over into the concept of bordered land. And this border, in a land running out of resources, is a serious border in no way similar to the current border between England and Scotland. The narrator writes about the checkpoint with no spacing in order to convey a breathless rush, a sense of the trauma of relating it:

'They force us out of the car the babies will make us safe doesn't seem true they are rough with us and they search us they make us take our clothes off'.<sup>112</sup> The 'they' of the checkpoint, violating the narrator and her female friend, are not mentioned again, even as 'soldiers' or 'guards'. They remain faceless and violent representatives of abusive authority, safe in their membership of an 'us', making abject Others of the women for their own entertainment.

Time and again the interplay of resource scarcity and the necessity of borders plays out in the novels of the constellation, and defended encampments are rife throughout the various narratives. Octavia E. Butler's *Parable* novels are especially focused on these kind of restrictions and borders. At the start of her story in *Parable of the Sower*, Olamina lives in a small community outside of Los

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

Angeles in the crumbling south of California.<sup>113</sup> She is part of an 'us', protected by a 'neighbourhood wall', outside of which the homeless, the destitute, the starving, the addicted, the rapists, the murderers, the diseased, and the dying are gathered. There is much against which to be compared and be found superior—concreting the sense that she is deserving of her place in the lifeboat of her walled home. This corresponds with Fiskio's belief that apocalyptic fiction illuminates the Social Darwinism, disdain for corporeal difference, and even eugenical ideas underpinning concepts like the 'lifeboat'.<sup>114</sup> Inside the wall—clean, housed, fed, educated, healthy and protected—Olamina can be distinguished from 'the barbarian and the defective' Others outside.<sup>115</sup> However, once her neighbourhood is stormed and destroyed, Olamina suddenly becomes one of the outsiders by virtue of losing her family and her home. Unwilling to apply to join one of the heavily fortified 'private' towns (which are owned and privatised by companies who convert their employees into indentured servants—heavily influenced by America's history of slavery), Olamina begins her journey to find a safe place in which to plant her colony, Acorn. When Acorn is finally underway as an organised community in *Parable of the Talents*, it serves as a kind of self-sufficient utopia. But, despite its Edenic ideals, it is fortified with a deliberately planted thistle wall, is guarded by an organised patrol and an armoured truck, and still requires its citizens to participate in and adhere to Earthseed rituals and principles. In this manner, however laudable its ecologically and socially sound ideologies, it still subscribes to the idea of an 'us' and the Other.

Within the world of *Gold Fame Citrus*, the ideas of 'scarcity' and the 'lifeboat' are inextricably entwined; water is scarce, and therefore places that have water are the lifeboats responsible for gathering people to safety. Watkins' narrator, in a description of the precarity of the land after drought, bumps up against two representatives of the lifeboat:

The wildfires pulsed behind them, and beyond those the Oregon militiamen cleaned their fingernails. The gatemen at Lake Tahoe changed shifts, one pausing to pluck a tendril of red thread from the other's uniform. Everything here was ash. Chalkdust and filament. Everything here could be obliterated with a wave of her hand, and she

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<sup>113</sup> This crumbling of California is written about in such a way that, according to Frederick Buell, '[...] lays bare the increasingly determining, systemic interplay between social marginalization, poverty, social breakdown, and environmental crisis.' Frederick Buell, *From Apocalypse to Way of Life: Environmental Crisis in the American Century* (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 287.

<sup>114</sup> Fiskio, p. 17.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

waved her hands *all the time*.<sup>116</sup>

The fragility of the land is represented here in the pulsing wildfires, chasing into the hills after the novel's central characters. Moreover, the free indirect speech (especially that provided in italics) captures Luz's hysteria; the idea that with a wave of a hand a whole city, a whole state, could be destroyed predominates in this scene. The strange, quiet tenderness of the red thread makes the gatemen horribly real in their detail; the militiamen having time to clean their fingernails means that they have more than enough might to stop three vulnerable refugees. There is an ominous sense of anticipation throughout, as if these representatives of power are just waiting for their cue to enforce the lifeboat's borders. In the world of *Gold Fame Citrus*, as in so many of the novels in the constellation, the powers who decide just who is welcome to resources and safety have agendas of their own. Dolores Herrero, in her writing on borders and post-apocalyptic narratives, has stated:

The degree of openness of the world varies depending on one's nationality, skin colour and, of course, wealth. Whereas borders are no more than a routine nuisance for some, they become insurmountable obstacles for others.<sup>117</sup>

This is certainly the situation that Luz, Ray and Ig find themselves in. Despite the novel's adherence to certain post-apocalyptic conventions—in which there are more choices (albeit fractured and dangerous) for the characters to make in comparison with dystopian narratives—each character presents with at least one characteristic which serves to Other them and prevent them from accessing a choice of escape.<sup>118</sup> Mixed-race Luz, who is half Caucasian and half-Mexican has a racialized identity which would mark her out to the dairymen who control the tunnels to Oregon and who are 'not fond of dark complexions'.<sup>119</sup> She is also a 'Mojav' (Californian), a 'nationality' of sorts which is unwanted almost everywhere.<sup>120</sup>

[...] still the word stung, here and where it hung on the signage of factories in Houston and Des Moines, hand-painted on the gates of apartment complexes in

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<sup>116</sup> Watkins, p.59.

<sup>117</sup> Herrero, p. 953.

<sup>118</sup> See Hicks (2016), p. 8.

<sup>119</sup> Watkins, p. 71. Hicks offers an interesting analysis of Luz's racialized identity in her exploitation as a child model in Hicks (2018), p. 639.

<sup>120</sup> In the novel, the perceived frontier history of Californians follows them around and is perhaps even blamed for the water crisis. This identity is referenced in the title. As Ray says: 'California people are quitters. No offense. It's just you've got restlessness in your blood [...] Your people came here looking for something better. Gold, fame, citrus. Mirage. They were feckless, yeah? Schemers. That's why no-one wants them now. Mojavs.' Watkins, p. 23.



Knoxville and Beaumont, in crooked plastic letter on the marquees of Indianapolis elementary schools: MOJAVS NOT WELCOME. NO WORK FOR MOJAVS. MOJAVS KEEP OUT. A chant ringing out from the moist nation's playgrounds: *The roses are wilted/ the orange trees are dead/ them Mojavs got lice/ all over they head.*<sup>121</sup>

This naked animosity towards Californians in the 'moist nation' is a clear example of the lifeboat rejecting a certain class of refugees.<sup>122</sup> The fact that this animosity appears to be coming from the *people* of the 'moist nation' (the 'us' of the lifeboat), rather than the military/governing bodies of the lifeboat, is indicative that the Californians are being scapegoated not only by policy but also by a kind of media propaganda. It is Dolores Herrero's belief that the media is influential in a nation's people forming an intolerance towards refugees and immigrants:

These unethical attitudes are often grounded on ignorance and fostered by the media, which strongly contribute to building up and enforcing the politics of fear established by the different governments.<sup>123</sup>

When a politics of fear is disseminated so widely in this way, then the people of the lifeboat (including schoolchildren who may not be aware of the prejudice of their nursery rhymes) can take up some of the work of the military or state by creating a kind of invisible border.<sup>124</sup> Hand-painted signs and playground chants might appear less dangerous than barbed wire or deadly fire, but they nevertheless contain within them threats which are menacing: a Californian refugee might be able to access water, but work, dwelling and schooling will not be permitted.<sup>125</sup> The fact that this intolerance is demonstrated so freely could also be a warning that any action taken against a refugee will be unpredictable and unregulated since it will come from the citizens themselves.

Ig, too, is at risk from a similar kind of discrimination as a Californian. She is, however, in some ways more endangered than Luz, since her background is a blank. There is a possibility that the people Luz and Ray stole Ig from were sex traffickers, and she will not be able to evacuate

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<sup>121</sup> Watkins, p. 23.

<sup>122</sup> Across the constellation, there are also similar attitudes towards Californian refugees in Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, in which Olamina's father says: 'Nobody wants California trash'. Butler, p. 78.

<sup>123</sup> Herrero, p. 955.

<sup>124</sup> '[...] there are frontiers that, being invisible, are more dangerous to cross than the physical kind'. Rushdie in Herrero, p. 955.

<sup>125</sup> Peripatetic immigrants in search of employment are automatically coded as 'non-white and thereby racialized and demonized'. Apel, p. 145; and 'migrants, often disconnected from their families, place, and cultural life and community, are feared, despised, and distrusted by resident populations, who feel increasingly threatened by a similar fate'. Apel, p. 146.

legally as she does not even have a birth certificate, let alone one that links her to Luz and Ray. Paperwork, or the lack thereof, continues to be a theme when it comes to Ray's inability to go down sanctioned routes of evacuation, since his identification reveals him as a disgraced drug-dealing medic AWOL from the military. Going the legal route would mean Ray would be immediately incarcerated at Fort Leavenworth, and Ig would be put into a system potentially as dangerous as the one from which she had just been taken. A terse conversation between Luz and Ray is proof of this:

'We can't evac.'

'Not without a clean ID'.

'And if we try —'

'They'll arrest me. Take her for sure.'

This was true, and unthinkable.<sup>126</sup>

The fact that 'take her' is not explained (take her where?) other than being something 'unthinkable' leaves the reader to fill in this blank in a world where children are market commodities.<sup>127</sup> The idea of Ray having ID that is 'clean' would be one that effectively erases his identity, and Ig having a 'clean' birth certificate would create an identity out of nothing. This paradox—that 'clean' ID to allow free movement would involve creating new entirely new people—cements their position of undesirable Others.<sup>128</sup> The difficulties with legal and perceived identity that all three characters experience in their attempts to reach safety pays credence to Ferrero's belief that 'Borders are not merely dividing lines, they have become intricate nets from which no human being can escape'.<sup>129</sup>

In *Wire Diamonds* I have made a concerted effort to explore this idea of an 'us' and an Other engendered by borders, albeit from a contrasting position of identity privilege. Set on an overseas garrison on an unnamed island, my narrators are military third-culture kids living in a world shaped and informed by Western colonialism.<sup>130</sup> *Wire Diamonds*, after *Gold Fame Citrus*, is titled with

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<sup>126</sup> Watkins, p. 59.

<sup>127</sup> Their 'friend' Lonnie commends them for taking Ig: 'No, I'm into it [...] Snatch all the Montessori canyon babies from their cribs. I just wish we'd thought of it'. p. 69.

<sup>128</sup> This is an issue that is of course reflective of the contemporary difficulties faced by people unable to legally migrate with their families without certain paperwork.

<sup>129</sup> Ferrero, p. 953.

<sup>130</sup> On third-culture-kids, Kathleen Gilbert writes: 'They are neither fully a part of the culture of their home country, nor of the other country or countries in which they live. TCKs exist in what can be described as a perpetual liminal state, on

nouns to hint at the brute, uncompromising truth that the place of the novel is formed (or framed) by a thing. The wire of perimeter fences is what shapes home for the narrators, chopping the world outside into wire diamonds. Both insubstantial—made out of chainlink that could be dismantled easily with wire-cutters—and yet heavily enforced with cameras, soldiers, guards and weaponry, the wire contains the dichotomy of inside/outside and is an omnipresent feature of garrison life. An overseas garrison is first and foremost ‘territory’, a patch of land where one country—sharing a bioregion, but separated by language, culture, law—resides inside another, with all the personal and geo-political tensions that entails.<sup>131</sup> The history of the garrison begins when the wire went up, and engages in erasure of anything that came before, such as how the land belonged to the country around it, or how humans and non-humans alike made it place, or even home.<sup>132</sup>

In *Wire Diamonds*, without a certain type of ID, the islanders cannot access the garrison. Suddenly, they are the wrong nationality, have the wrong skin-colour, wrong first language, wrong history, wrong ancestry. The wire functions as a membrane that keeps them out, but which allows military personnel and their dependents two-way access. This corresponds with Herrero’s belief that borders, to some, are ‘no more than a routine nuisance’, but for others, ‘insurmountable obstacles’.<sup>133</sup> This setting for the novel enabled an exploration of the narrators’ positionality and privilege on the island. Sara Maria Acevedo (et al) has suggested that

[...] positioning allows for the subjective histories of individuals—identities, personal attributes, experiences, as well as preconceived narratives and understandings of our social locations—to play a critical function in the production of interpersonal behavior.<sup>134</sup>

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the threshold of the culture of their parents’ home country (or countries) and that of the country in which they grow and learn to live life. Paradoxically, they are a part of both countries while also being apart from both of them’. Gilbert, p. 94; Gibson writes that ‘[...] the sons and daughters of serving soldiers grow up with a foot in both civilian and army camps. p.5.

<sup>131</sup> ‘Bioregion’ explored more in L. Buell, p. 83-84; Tim Winton explores the way that terms for country have changed over time, including the acquisitive ‘territory’ in *Island Home* p. 23-4.

<sup>132</sup> This is of course mirrored on a much larger scale in places such as the US which has an estimated 50,000 years of human dwelling in contrast with a ‘smug’ folk history dating back to Christopher Columbus. Bruce Elliott Johansen, *The Native Peoples of North America: A History, Volume 1* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006), pp. 11-17.

<sup>133</sup> Herrero, p. 953.

<sup>134</sup> Sara Maria Acevedo and others, “Positionality as Knowledge: From Pedagogy to Praxis”, *Integral Review*, 11.1, (2015) 28-46 (p. 32).

If positionality is to be understood as flexible and dependent on context, then the narrators each have multiple and intersecting identities.<sup>135</sup> Jesamy is female in a male-dominated and controlled society.<sup>136</sup> Jakey is queer in a deeply intolerant time and place. They are all three ‘army brats’—considered (along with their mother) ‘dependents’ of Stephen, who is ‘personnel’—and lack the right to decide where they live.<sup>137</sup> They are also white, and tacit beneficiaries of the system of oppression engendered by the garrison’s presence on the island. Throughout most of the book the narrators are relatively uncritical of their situation. This is related to the fact that they are children, slowly coming to awareness of the way the world around them works, but is also psychologically underpinned by their lived experience of place.<sup>138</sup> As military third-culture kids, all the narrators are used to being uprooted constantly from one place into another—places that are designed to have significant similarities to each other (overseas garrisons or camps occupying territory; segregated by rank and ‘rigid social hierarchy’; structured by military ritual and practice; defended by armed soldiers; schools following identical curricula; a common language) and yet which are unknown at the same time.<sup>139</sup> It is also something completely expected and fixed in their lives for them to live in garrisons separated from the countries around them, in possession by default of differing wealth, power and resources.

Luis Sánchez writes that: ‘Positions act on the knowledge a person has about things, both material and abstract’.<sup>140</sup> The narrators’ position behind the wire of the garrison has created a neutrality where there is in fact a political reality to the wire. In order for the narrators to be aware of their positions within the island’s structure, they need to be able to see their lives from the perspective of those outside of the garrison’s wire. Each narrator comes to this awareness in their own way, when in some kind of relationship to someone outside of the garrison. It is only when Jesamy forms a tentative relationship with Theo—an islander—that she is confronted with the fact of the wire and its segregating effects:

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Jervis, Chapter 2; Clever and Segal, p. 26.

<sup>137</sup> ‘Army brats’: Gibson, p. 21; ‘dependents’: Clever and Segal, p. 26; ‘personnel’: Rowe et al, p. 490; ‘The peripatetic nature of military childhood has been labelled ‘turbulent’ by Gibson, p. 52.

<sup>138</sup> L. Buell has some interesting ideas surrounding childhood attachment to place, p. 73-5.

<sup>139</sup> Gibson, p. 7.

<sup>140</sup> Luis Sánchez, ‘Positionality’, *Encyclopaedia of Geography* ed. by Barney Warf  
<<https://sk.sagepub.com/reference/geography/n913.xml>> [accessed 10.01.2021]

There was the wire, and then the guards with their adult-sized guns, and then the floodlights and the barriers. There were four rings of protection between me and Theo now, and he was only just realizing it. He lived on the outside of that, but past all those layers, at the bottom of the hill, was my home. <sup>141</sup>

Whilst she approaches the wire from a self-absorbed stance—of something that prevents her from accessing the freedom she desires—it is the first time she associates the wire with being anything other than a neutral, natural installation in her life. Theo necessarily has a very different set of identities to her, some more privileged, some less so, but in the context of his being prevented from accessing the garrison, he takes on the role of outsider to her insider. <sup>142</sup>

Acevedo et al write that ‘we adopt different stances as we navigate different communities of interaction’.<sup>143</sup> This is something that Ash definitely engages in when he spends time with his friends on the guard patrol. Most of these men live on the island’s border, which is a true liminal space, geo-politically speaking.<sup>144</sup> Within the social context of the garrison, Ash holds power and privilege over the guards, to the extent that he tries to ‘buy’ an amendment to the gate log-book. Off the garrison, however, things aren’t as straightforward.<sup>145</sup> He goes up to their home on the line with Jakey to play chess and get high, but his friends up there are armed, embroiled as they are in the island’s political unease which places them in a threatened ethnic minority. In contrast with the soldiers on the base, these men are not representative of the state or military, they are very much citizen-soldiers, and—however friendly to the narrators—much more unpredictable and therefore dangerous. Away from the ‘preconceived narratives and understandings of our social locations’, away from the garrison’s orbit of power, Ash’s privileged identity falls away until he is just a teenage boy in a room of armed and politically ambiguous men.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Rachael Thomas, *Wire Diamonds* (unpublished) p. 113.

<sup>142</sup> Theo’s context changes after the island faces fires, power outages and water shortages; his ‘outsider’ role becomes ever more entrenched when the garrison (functioning as a lifeboat) refuses to help the islanders.

<sup>143</sup> Acevedo, p. 32.

<sup>144</sup> Navaro-Yashin, and Calame & Charlesworth were, as mentioned in the Literature Review, helpful in thinking through the space of the island of *Wire Diamonds*.

<sup>145</sup> Emulating Mackintosh and Hunter, I tried to keep the politics of the line, and of the island as a whole, free of much exposition. The viewpoint is restricted by the narrators’ ignorance, and any relations are seen through their individual social relationships with other characters.

<sup>146</sup> Acevedo, p. 32.

Some of ‘the disaster women’ were directly influenced by each other’s work, and Hunter has indicated that *How I Live Now* served as inspiration to her novel with regards to the positioning of her narrator. She has said in interview that:

[*How I Live Now*] definitely has a similar sense of characters who are on the edge of a disaster seeing the peripheral aftereffects, not right there in the battle. It seems to me that would be how most people would experience a disaster, being on the periphery. There are so many more people having to flee or trying to get away from danger than are at the centre of events.<sup>147</sup>

Hunter’s idea of characters on the periphery of disaster rather than the ‘action heroine[s] of their own lives’, was a pivotal choice with regards to the narrators’ positionality in relation to the multiple disasters of their island home.<sup>148</sup> *Wire Diamonds* was written about adolescents rather than intended for YA readers, and therefore the characterisations of the narrators were not designed to be the active, hard-bodied paeans of survival that proliferate in YA versions of the apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic genre.<sup>149</sup> This felt essential, in order to communicate a ‘realistic’ version of living through disaster. The multiple disasters of the island are not fleshed out—following precedents set by Rosoff, Hunter, and Mackintosh, who also eschew detailed descriptions of apocalyptic fall-out, preferring instead to focus on the interior landscapes of their characters—since the narrators are not going to be actively participating in any action relating to the disasters.<sup>150</sup> Having only a fragmentary idea of what is going on in their world was especially important in a book in first- and close second-person narration. Whilst there felt like important points to make about inequality and ongoing neo-imperial and climate-related violence, it would have seemed false for the—necessarily—self-interested teenagers to have any comprehensive political or ethical

<sup>147</sup> Martha Greengrass, ‘The Interview: Megan Hunter on *The End We Start From*’, *Waterstones blog* (2018) <<https://www.waterstones.com/blog/the-interview-megan-hunter-on-the-end-we-start-from>> [accessed 13.02.2021]

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> This definitely something I was aware of when writing the themes of sibling-incest in *Wire Diamonds*.

<sup>150</sup> Rosoff: ‘For me real voice doesn’t need much plot. Real voice is about how people feel and live and how they negotiate the world, and that is really what interests me.’ In Melissa Albert, ‘A Conversation with Meg Rosoff, Author of *How I Live Now*’, *Barnes and Noble* (2013) <<https://www.barnesandnoble.com/blog/a-conversation-with-meg-rosoff-author-of-how-i-live-now-in-theaters-today/>> [accessed 13.02.2021]

Mackintosh: ‘The world isn’t really explored that much. For me, it is much more about the world of the sisters and what they are experiencing.’ In Coslett.

Hunter, ‘The question I always had in my mind was, “does this maintain the atmosphere of the book” and that atmosphere is, I hope, a feeling that things are uncertain, unknown or repressed. There’s a sense in which there’s a distance for the reader, so the narrator is experiencing a disaster but she’s also at a distance from it, only knowing certain, fragmentary aspects of the situation’. In Greengrass.

views. Alongside their awareness of the island's schisms, there needed to be a much deeper exploration of their interior landscapes —the great first loves, tangled sibling bonds, and fears and lusts of adolescence. It also seemed important to underline the vulnerability and enforced passivity of adolescents in a rigidly organised and paternalistic institution like that of the military. Instead of writing exposition on how my narrators are positioned within this novel, those various moments when characters are silent or fail to speak directly about their circumstances were intended to create a gap or fissure in the narrative through which their positionality can be made clear. An example of this is found below in Jakey's narration, whereby the siblings leave the safety of the garrison after the fires and devastating explosion of the power-station:

Out on the motorway the fire damage still made everything look like we were on the surface of a different planet. The smell was still strong of the taste of burnt grass and chemicals, so we rolled the windows up like last time and just shot through the wilderness. Inside the car the chugga-chugga of the guitars was louder, and Stevie Nicks was singing about being on the edge of seventeen like that was all we had to worry about. Maybe it was.<sup>151</sup>

Jakey verbalises both his sense of danger of the island, and the opt-out he has from living in a safe space within this place of 'difficult heritage.'<sup>152</sup> In thinking through their positionality, especially when compared with the desperate inequalities faced by both the characters in the constellation and the people living on the island outside the garrison, I came to think of the siblings as bearing a resemblance to 'dark tourists'—those who visit sites of major cataclysm or atrocity (such as Chernobyl, the Killing Fields, Auschwitz, even latterly Grenfell Tower)—in the sense that they are drawn to certain elements of the country (such as Cracked Rock) as spectacles rather than sites to which they have deep personal and historical links.<sup>153</sup> This was compounded by Gibson, in *Army Childhood*, linking Army children to 'tourists' when on overseas postings.<sup>154</sup> The narrators'

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<sup>151</sup> Thomas, (not included in this thesis).

<sup>152</sup> Simon Osborne, 'Dark Tourism: When Tragedy meets tourism', *National Geographic* (2019) <<https://www.nationalgeographic.co.uk/travel/2018/02/dark-tourism-when-tragedy-meets-tourism>> [accessed 6.09.2020]

<sup>153</sup> Osborne.

<sup>154</sup> Gibson, p. 52.

positionality comes into play in several of the chapters of this essay, and it is their resemblance to dark tourists that informed how I both approach and elude the apocalyptic within *Wire Diamonds*.

#### 4. Islands and Coming-of-Age Fiction

Broadly speaking, within literature, islands are important devices with which an author can bound the action of a novel. Ben Myers, in an article about the draw of islands to writers, states: 'Islands occupy a significant space in literature. They are more than scenic locations; they are literary devices whose natural boundaries help shape and contain narratives'.<sup>155</sup> This shaping is enabled in large part because of the duality of islands, which Paul Kincaid presents neatly in his twin concepts of islomania and insularity: 'Islomania: the island as dream state, the object of desire, the ideal; and insularity: the island as prison or fortress that holds us apart from the rest of the world'.<sup>156</sup> The 'imaginative dividend' of islands is so powerful precisely because of their vacillation between utopia to fortress.<sup>157</sup> Kincaid assigns the following attributes to islands: '[...] prison and fortress, theater of experiment, dreamscape'.<sup>158</sup> He also says these 'are roles that suit the enterprise of science fiction, indeed the enterprise of fiction'.<sup>159</sup> These roles of the island therefore lend themselves wonderfully to the 'what if' work of apocalyptic speculative fiction. These theatres of experiment are the perfect places for various systems to flourish, some positive, some negative, and, in the case of *The Water Cure*, some outlandishly abusive.<sup>160</sup> Kincaid also makes it clear that these islands do not have to be literally geographical, quoting J.G. Ballard in calling them also 'a state of mind'.<sup>161</sup> Following both Kincaid and Ballard, then, I employ the verbed concepts 'islanded' or 'islanding' throughout this section. I do so to provide a sense of being fortified, with its paradoxical marriage of concurrent positive and negative connotations. This is used in senses where islands are created that are not literally geographical islands—water land water—but which

<sup>155</sup> Ben Myers, 'Why writers treasure islands', *The Guardian* (31 May 2011)

<<https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2011/may/31/writers-islands-fiction>> [accessed 17.07.20]

<sup>156</sup> Paul Kincaid, 'Islomania? Insularity? The Myth of the Island in British Science Fiction', *Extrapolation*, 48.3 (2007) 462-471 (p. 463).

<sup>157</sup> '[...] we inhabit islands because of the imaginative dividend, in terms of mythic resonance, that they pay'. Kincaid, p. 463.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 470

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>160</sup> As Myers says, islands are 'places where law breaks down and conventional morality gets tested'.

<sup>161</sup> JG Ballard in Kincaid, p. 462.



nevertheless hold the conceptual power of islands.

Loss of contact with the wider world is an important element in the characters of apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic narratives becoming islanded. As Hicks writes:

[...] the *loss* of a global perspective—the luxury of global intelligence that we currently enjoy through access to 24-hour international news is one of the elements of modernity that is conspicuously denied the characters in these narratives. In many cases, they simply don't *know* if the rest of the world suffers if they do.<sup>162</sup>

Across the constellation of 'the disaster women', islands abound, both literally and as, to quote JG Ballard, 'a state of mind'.<sup>163</sup> Two twinned examples of islands within the constellation come within Hunter's *The End We Start From* and Rosoff's *How I Live Now*. The island in *How I Live Now* is an island in the 'state of mind' sense, in the shape of a farm where 15-year old Daisy and her teenaged cousins are left when her aunt goes to work overseas and doesn't return after the sudden outbreak of war.<sup>164</sup> The island of *The End We Start From* is an island geographically, surrounded by the sea: 'From its windows, all you can see is miles and miles of it. The shimmering green-grey-blue terror'.<sup>165</sup> Both of these places are islanded by remoteness: the former in a countryside isolation from the urban centres of action, and the latter an obscure Scottish island. They also correspond with Hicks' theory about lack of contact with the outside world; the farm-island cut off by unreliable phone and computer connections and a lack of television, and the Scottish-island having only a radio which is mainly static.<sup>166</sup> This lack of awareness in *How I Live Now* is underlined by the (much-criticised) line about a bomb going off in London and 'something like seven or seventy thousand people got killed'.<sup>167</sup>

It is also worth noting that in both novels the island is conceptualised as a bucolic idyll away from the wastes of the apocalypse. They both engage with the pastoral, which Fiskio defines as

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<sup>162</sup> Hicks, (2016), p. 7.

<sup>163</sup> JG Ballard in Kincaid, p. 462.

<sup>164</sup> There is definitely more than a tinge of the Golding-esque to the semi-feral freedoms of the cousins. Indeed, Tate has described *Lord of the Flies* as a kind of 'ur-text for YA post-apocalyptic fiction.' Tate, p. 106.

<sup>165</sup> Hunter, p. 74.

<sup>166</sup> 'All the usual sources of information including e-mail and cell phones were much too slow and unreliable to be of any use and there was no television to speak of.' Rosoff, p. 55; 'I turn the radio on [...] We listen to the crackle like the wind.' Hunter, p. 85.

<sup>167</sup> Rosoff, p. 27. The critics might have missed the teenaged narrator's studied sardonic tone throughout the rest of the book.

'the literary and aesthetic mode that celebrates rural nature as an antidote to the corruption of urban life'.<sup>168</sup> The farm-island represents a powerfully nostalgic English version of this idyll, a kind of 'utopian fantasy of late capitalism', with flora and fauna alike bursting into noisy abundance without the usual human industry.<sup>169</sup> The Scottish-island, too, is generously productive, with the narrator writing: 'We actually grow things here. We put seeds in the ground and they grow'.<sup>170</sup> This description conveys some disbelief at the simplicity of it: seeds equals food. The cataclysm in this novel is a climate-related flood, so it is even more miraculous that the earth would continue to provide after revolting against its mismanagement. As in so many of the novels of the constellation, succour comes from a renewed relationship with the earth and the means of production.<sup>171</sup>

Most importantly, amongst this pastoral isolation, societal norms dictating relationships can be rejected in favour of a more communal type of living and loving. The cousins of *How I Live Now* delight in being able to make their own rules for survival: sleeping huddled together in the lambing barn; cobbling together makeshift meals; and falling in love with blood relatives.<sup>172</sup> Daisy says this of the world in retreat:

[...] the war provided a perfect limbo in which two people who were too young and too related could start kissing without anything or anyone making us stop. There were no parents, no teachers, no schedules [...] There no longer *was* any Real World.<sup>173</sup>

The farm-island possesses none of the negative insularity of Kincaid's island; without the structural influence of the Real World the teenage cousins revel in their small survivalist pack, and fear only losing their islanded togetherness.<sup>174</sup> Encroachment from the outside world is deeply resented in this novel; when the military requisitions their farm and land they are split up and evacuated and this only serves to heighten their feelings towards their farm-island as a 'dream state, the object of

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<sup>168</sup> Fiskio, p. 19.

<sup>169</sup> 'Nostalgia: '[...] nostalgia that implicitly advocates a return to what is seen as a more benevolent past, before the widespread use of pesticides or when anthropogenic climate change still could be reversed, and by implication to a time when humans had little perceptible impact on nonhumannature.' Salmose, p. 1428; 'utopian': Kirk Boyle in Benczik, p. 211.

Examples of the farm-island: Rosoff, p. 57-8.

<sup>170</sup> Hunter, p. 79.

<sup>171</sup> Acorn of Butler's *Parable* novels for the most clearly drawn line between human wellbeing and agriculture.

<sup>172</sup> Rosoff, smoking, p. 48; barn, p. 32; meals, p. 59.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.* p. 61.

desire, the ideal.’ The rest of the novel is geared towards their returning to it.<sup>175</sup>

In *The End We Start From* the narrator falls into a love for her friend O, with whom she mothers both O’s baby and her own, breastfeeding them interchangeably (which is something she wonders if her missing husband would approve of).<sup>176</sup> She and O ‘[...] have started knowing each other’s thoughts. She thinks it is coming through the milk’.<sup>177</sup> She falls in love with their friends and their children, living happily in a self-sufficient world of well-water, stews, knitting and candles. By ‘returning’ (in an historical sense) to a more traditional, community-based existence, her newfound contentment seems to reflect what Ursula Heise terms a ‘pastoral countermodel to the toxic world’.<sup>178</sup> It is as though the island is a ‘pause’ for her, and it certainly reads as a rest for the reader, as compared with the drowned London she left behind, the deathly panic of England, the overcrowded shelters on her journey, and, indeed, her exhausting return to her mouldy apartment and her traumatised husband after the floodwaters subside. However, in order to keep such a place intact and supportive to life, a certain amount of exclusion is required. It is implied that the Scottish island could take on a role something akin to a lifeboat when H., a fellow island-dweller, suggests going on rescue missions to bring back refugees. The narrator does not report a discussion on it, writing instead only: ‘He doesn’t go. We all have our own rooms here, and enough food. Stockpiles’.<sup>179</sup> A scarcity mindset leads to a quiet consensus that the island should be kept a secret Eden, and thus plays into the ‘politics of exclusion’ that Fiskio believes is at the centre of the lifeboat.<sup>180</sup> Since there are no refugees aware of it in order to actively seek asylum, the island lifeboat is able to exist without the need for policing or defence.

This peripheral positioning of the narrators in both books perhaps influences how they perceive their respective islands. Being on the outside of events and engaging in survival and fleeing tactics instead of active participation in fighting and/or saving the world might lead them to value safety, security and companionship over loftier political pursuits.<sup>181</sup> These factors ensure that—set against

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<sup>175</sup> Kincaid, p. 463.

<sup>176</sup> Hunter, p. 76; p. 66;

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>178</sup> Heise in Fiskio, p. 20.

<sup>179</sup> Hunter, p. 84.

<sup>180</sup> Fiskio, p. 18.

<sup>181</sup> There has been discussion over whether or not Meg Rosoff’s book is YA. She believes that she wrote a novel *about* adolescents, which is enjoyed ‘half and half’ by teenagers and adults. Albert. This uncertainty about its age-related genre might lead to its difference from other apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic YA (e.g. *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* series) in terms of characters, with the latter’s adolescent characters being much more active and participatory in

the apocalyptic horror of war, flood and societal collapse—the islands in *How I Live Now* and *The End We Start From* are represented in wholly positive terms.

In contrast to these relatively simple conceptions of the island, *The Water Cure* is an altogether thornier depiction of a literary island. It very much contains the paradoxical concepts of both islomania and insularity.<sup>182</sup> It is both a psychological prison ‘descending into brutal barbarism away from the constraints of society’ and/or a retreat from the poisonous post-apocalyptic world outside (borrowing from the lifeboat metaphor of Limits discourse).<sup>183</sup> It is also both geographically and psychologically an island. The fact that the island is revealed at the end to not be an island at all—rather an outcrop connecting to the wider world outside of its fencing—does not detract from its ‘islandness’; the psychological factors keeping the girls in place being just as effective, if not more so than mere hyper-salinated water. This island is very much a state of mind. The fact that it is part of the mainland actually reinforces the psychological state of the island, and points to the deeply sinister mechanisms by which Mother and King keep the sisters captive on an imaginary island.

One such mechanism that serves to island the sisters is the restriction of outside communication also present in both Hunter’s and Rosoff’s novels. Obviously, this is a key trope in apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic fiction. However, Mackintosh elevates this in *The Water Cure* to the extent that it tallies more closely with the techniques used by cultic organisations in exerting ‘undue influence’ on their adherents.<sup>184</sup> The sisters have grown up within the apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic world created by King and Mother and know of nothing outside their island. Everything that they know is limited to what their parents tell them, or things they gleaned from the women that used to visit the island, years before, for ‘the water cure’.<sup>185</sup> Even then, the women that visited were there to be cleansed and healed after being ‘ruined’ by men.<sup>186</sup> In their unhealthy, vulnerable states, they

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their worlds’ politics and conflict.

<sup>182</sup> Kincaid.

<sup>183</sup> Kincaid, p. 466.

<sup>184</sup> ‘key trope’: Hicks (2016) p. 7; “undue influence” is an exploitative influence, where individuals surrender their own best interests to a dominant other.’ S.A. Hassan, M.J. Shah, ‘The anatomy of undue influence used by terrorist cults and traffickers to induce helplessness and trauma, so creating false identities’, *Ethics, Medicine and Public Health*, 8 (2019), 97-107 (p. 98).

<sup>185</sup> The water cure is the end point of various water-based purifications, which involves being held face down in a basin of water until the point of drowning.

<sup>186</sup> *The Water Cure* demonstrates within it the use of ‘Sacred Science’, defined by Hassan and Shah as something ‘which asserts that the group’s dogma is both rigorously scientific and morally correct, and leaves no room for critical questions or evidence that challenges the ideology.’ p. 99. This is seen in the rituals of their ‘methods’, which are all pseudo-medical cleanses based around salt and water.

seemed to corroborate Mother and King's assertion that men are 'toxic'.<sup>187</sup> The women were too 'toxic' for the sisters to go near, and had to undergo 'acclimatization'.<sup>188</sup> The idea of toxicity is an effective deterrent, and by the time the sisters are allowed near them, they will have been converted to the cultic beliefs and practices of the island. When a woman died from the 'cure', there was enough confirmation bias in the sisters' worldview that they could be convinced that 'The woman had not been ready to take the cure. Her body proved unfit. It was her own fault'.<sup>189</sup>

When King brings back magazines for Mother, Lia takes a forbidden peek at them, and is immediately reported by her hysterical sisters because of the fear of poison on the pages.<sup>190</sup> This has parallels with those citizens of the lifeboat in *Gold Fame Citrus* who reinforce the received idea of Californian refugees being shiftless and lice-ridden, and therefore unwelcome in the lifeboat. King and Mother have sufficiently convinced the sisters that their island is a lifeboat and that anything from the outside is dirty and poisonous; ultimately they take up the policing of thoughts and behaviour within themselves.<sup>191</sup> The isolation and protective measures Lia believes she has to undertake after trying to see the outside world fortifies the danger of the magazines, and therefore King and Mother keep them from learning of anything outside of their island.<sup>192</sup> Through this kind of behaviour, the sisters share a similarity with other characters of post-apocalyptic worlds, inasmuch that they do not recognise markers of the 'real world'.<sup>193</sup> Lia writes:

[...] I see a strange bird pass overhead. It is not one I've ever seen before, and I look up in awe at the stiff wings, its shadowed shape dark against the sky. It's far away, yet I can hear the drone of its song very faintly through the open sliver of my bathroom window.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> Mackintosh, p.41.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., p. 240; This aligns with Hassan and Shah's 'Dispensing of Existence', whereby cult members are either excommunicated or disposed of via death or 'disappearance'. p. 99

<sup>190</sup> Mackintosh, p. 31.

<sup>191</sup> Fitting in with Hassan and Shah's 'Milieu control' which 'not only influences communication between people; but also control people's thoughts, feelings and behaviors'. p. 99.

<sup>192</sup> Mackintosh, p. 31.

<sup>193</sup> Such as Alexandra in *Station 11* who, when seeing a computer screen, is 'enraptured, the screen a magical thing with no memories attached.' Emily St. John Mandel, p. 39; real world is in quotation marks, since apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic narratives can privilege the sense of a marvellous before-time, which is somehow more real than the current apocalyptic era, and which is dependent 'on the idea of recovery of patriarchal and imperialist norms.' Susan Watkins, p. 7.

<sup>194</sup> Mackintosh, p. 67.

The fact that Lia cannot even recognise a plane flying overhead indicates to the reader that beneath the apparent safety of the island is a disturbing ignorance engendered by the severance of the siblings from the real world. In contrast to *Station 11*, where the world is littered with the defunct technologies of the pre-pandemic times, this island is 'clean' of any history outside of its own. In this way, it also has similarities with the garrison of *Wire Diamonds*. As Kincaid writes: 'Utopia can only be the ideal state because it is set upon an artificially created island which cuts it off from the baleful influence of the rest of the world'.<sup>195</sup> The particular 'utopia' of the island is indeed artificially created, precisely because the rest of the world can be twisted by Mother and King into a grave and monstrous danger, and it is this that allows their abuse. They are brought up in an atmosphere of constant gaslighting, tricked into believing that they are ill and frail, and that it is both their fault, and the power of the world outside. Lia says: 'My body, King said, was the sort that would attract harm, the sort that wouldn't last long elsewhere'.<sup>196</sup> The 'preparations' for the outside world that they are taught how to make are designed to fail; one is hyperventilating until blackout, so that King can say 'You see how quickly you'd die out there?'<sup>197</sup> They are also malnourished by design. Grace writes:

Kept us only in a twilight health, our bones always painful, our teeth rotting where they lay in our mouths. Vitamin pills the shape and size of thumbnails when I was pregnant. 'Deadly for your sisters' Mother intoned darkly.<sup>198</sup>

Their obliviousness is carefully cultivated, and, despite Grace (who is the eldest) being 30, they are still functionally children with regards to their awareness of their own bodies. When Llew asks Lia if she is 'taking precautions' when they have sex, Lia thinks 'of the water gulped in pints, the wounds on my legs, the hot water, the showers'.<sup>199</sup> She says yes, not knowing what he means. When Grace becomes pregnant by King, Lia says: 'Grace's stomach grows, filling with blood or air.'<sup>200</sup> Grace says: 'I thought I was dying for some time.'<sup>201</sup> Detached from their bodies, they are easily

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<sup>195</sup> Kincaid, p. 463.

<sup>196</sup> Mackintosh, p. 77.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29; This corresponds with Hassan and Shah's "'Demand for Purity", where the group establishes impossible standards for performance, and creates an environment of guilt and shame.' p. 99.

<sup>198</sup> Mackintosh, p. 228.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 173-4.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 225.

detached from their minds as well. The radically restricted perspective of the girls serves an important purpose: they cannot leave. To them, the world outside of the island moves in strange and dangerous patterns, against which they must use their abusive practises and rituals in mitigation.<sup>202</sup> Due to how deeply entrenched their indoctrination is, they believe that they can only leave if they take the water cure, and they have been told that their 'bodies didn't need it'.<sup>203</sup> This ordinance, combined with the fear of the toxicity of the world outside, has them neatly knotted to the island. Both the infantilism of the sisters and the way that they tell their stories in a restricted first person is where another key influence of my writing comes into play; the coming-of-age narrative. In keeping with Ballard's island as a 'state of mind', adolescence plays a large role in islanding these narrators who are caught in the strange, lusty disorder between the unknowingness (often portrayed as 'innocence') of childhood, and the awareness of adulthood.<sup>204</sup> Thus, their journey throughout *The Water Cure* could be construed as a form of coming-of-age narrative.

Apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic fiction as a genre does not have fixed and impermeable borders and, as such, can contain conventions of other genres or even straddle genre boundaries.<sup>205</sup> It seems as though the apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic genre encapsulates some of the rawness of adolescent experience, by amplifying the surroundings until they became extreme and perpetually on the edge of disaster. Indeed, in the introduction to her edited book *Female Rebellion in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction*, Sara K. Day includes a quotation from Hintz and Ostry on the precise cross-over between apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic fiction and the coming-of-age genre:

[...] adolescence frequently entails traumatic suffering and personal awakening. The adolescent comes to recognize the faults and weaknesses of his or her society,

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<sup>202</sup> This fits in with Hassan and Shah's "'Mystical Manipulation", and it involves the deliberate engineering of experiences which are staged to seem spontaneous, and even supernatural.' p. 99. The girls believe that the sea has started producing corpses, simply because of the human events on the 'island':

"The sea", she says. "It's giving up its dead."

"Why?" I ask.

"Because everything's becoming ruined," she says'. Mackintosh, p. 189. Rather than a mystical decision taken by the ocean to punish the sisters, the corpse is more than likely their mother, killed on King's orders.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., p. 240.

<sup>204</sup> Kenneth Millard puts in quotation marks that "'innocence" which childhood and adolescence are often believed to exemplify.' Kenneth Millard, *Coming of Age in Contemporary American Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007) p. 5.

<sup>205</sup> As Jane Donawerth writes: '[...] the borders of utopia and dystopia as genres are not rigid, but permeable.' in Baccolini and Moylan, p. 29.

and rebels against it [...] Dystopian literature thus mingles well with the coming-of-age novel, which features a loss of innocence.<sup>206</sup>

The kind of personal awakening which involves a protagonist progressing from a 'naive or callow youth', in order to come to a 'mature adult consciousness', will of course contain challenges which may be traumatic, and the extreme landscapes of apocalyptic fiction provide a 'fertile environment' in which to explore these challenges.<sup>207</sup> YA fiction, heavily concerned as it is with coming-of-age narratives, is a key example of how the apocalyptic genre is employed to capture the difficult 'threshold between childhood and the responsibilities of adult life'.<sup>208</sup> In their introduction to *Contemporary Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults* Balaka Basu, Katherine Broad and Carrie Hintz argue that 'YA dystopias recapitulate the conventions of the classic Bildungsroman, using political strife and environmental disaster or other forms of turmoil as the catalyst for achieving adulthood'.<sup>209</sup>

Tate, too, is of the belief that motifs of the coming-of-age narrative such as 'romantic awakening and disappointment, loss, exile, grief and return, punctuate recent dystopia'.<sup>210</sup>

All of these facts notwithstanding, it is not necessary for the marriage of the apocalyptic and the coming-of-age to take place within YA fiction.<sup>211</sup> None of novels of 'the disaster women' are YA, with the arguable exception of Rosoff's *How I Live Now*, and yet approximately half of them are narrated by or centre on adolescents, and contain significant coming-of-age tropes. Folded into and serving to dramatically heighten coming-of-age themes within apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic narratives is the distinct lack of parental/benevolent authority figures.<sup>212</sup> This ranges from characters having to learn how to survive on their own (as in Rosoff, Mackintosh and St John Mandel)<sup>213</sup>, to those adolescents who strive to found societies which could protect other vulnerable

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<sup>206</sup> Day, p. 7.

<sup>207</sup> Millard, p. 154. Tate, p. 104.

<sup>208</sup> Tate, p. 104.

<sup>209</sup> Basu et al, p. 7.

<sup>210</sup> Tate, p. 105.

<sup>211</sup> Kazuo Ishiguro's haunting and deceptively matter-of-fact *Never Let Me Go* is a marvellous exemplar of a non-YA coming-of-age-narrative wrapped within the dystopian genre. Joseph O'Neil in *The Atlantic* writes: 'Ishiguro's imagining of the children's misshapen little world is profoundly thoughtful, and their hesitant progression into knowledge of their plight is an extreme and heartbreaking version of the exodus of all children from the innocence in which the benevolent but fraudulent adult world conspires to place them'. Joseph O'Neil, 'New Fiction: Finds and Flops', *The Atlantic* (2005) <<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2005/05/new-fiction/303918/>> [accessed 14.02.2021]

<sup>212</sup> Tate describes this as 'a literary tradition in which adult authority is typically dangerous, despotic and deceitful'. Tate, p. 106.

<sup>213</sup> 'These children have to become their own protectors when older mentors prove, at best, highly ambiguous figures whose motivations are equivocal.' *Ibid.*, p. 104.



people (evident in Newman and Butler).<sup>214</sup>

The sisters of *The Water Cure*, despite Grace and Lia being older than the common coming-of-age timeframe of between 12 and 19, are infantilised to such an extent that their ages do not exist along a conventional timeline.<sup>215</sup> They do, however, engage with many of the aforementioned tropes of coming-of-age narratives, and the idea of adults as ambiguous, dangerous or untrustworthy is a theme that runs deeply throughout *The Water Cure*. Through a combination of these themes—or their substituted approximations—the narrators come through adolescent challenges to reach some kind of empowerment from their ‘position of subordination and alienation’.<sup>216</sup> *The Water Cure* gives its siblings some severe trials indeed: instead of puberty, Grace experiences what she believes to be incest with King, pregnancy with his child and a resulting traumatic stillbirth; the sisters’ moments of crisis involve grievous bodily harm to themselves and each other, and the messy, shocking murder of two men. However, perhaps the most important coming-of-age themes that *The Water Cure* engages with are the ones relating to leaving home and the relationship to the father, which are inextricably entangled. Millard states that: ‘Coming of age is [...] a drama of coming to terms with the father, and with all the social and cultural governance for which he stands’.<sup>217</sup> Because of the ‘insularity dictated by the island setting’, King is immediately representative of the ‘social and cultural governance’ under which the sisters live; he is responsible for both the construction and the maintenance of his kingdom.<sup>218</sup> The decisive moment that the sisters of *The Water Cure* come-of-age is when they realise that they have been lied to by King about their island home. Grace says:

I have always believed our home to be an island. A healing place, untouched, something skipped over and forgotten. A geographical miracle. But it is mainland, like everywhere else. It is just another part of the coarse, toxic earth. You lied to us about this. And so what else? <sup>219</sup>

With this one realisation their entire upbringing is open to question, as is their conceptualisation of who and what they are. At this point, the characters are forced to ask themselves if they really are

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<sup>214</sup> the latter having more in common with the YA ‘notion of adolescents creating a better world than that made by adults’. Braithwaite, 2010, p. 10.

<sup>215</sup> Barbara White in Millard, p.4.

<sup>216</sup> Neil Campbell in Millard, p. 13.

<sup>217</sup> Millard, p. 15.

<sup>218</sup> Kincaid, p. 467; Millard, p. 15.

<sup>219</sup> Mackintosh, p. 220.

weak, sick, open to the damage of men.<sup>220</sup> In question, too, is the rest of the toxic, broken world outside their island. When they see the ‘air peach-ripe with toxicity’, they wonder if those colours could just be a sunset?<sup>221</sup> They ask themselves if the days really are getting hotter because the men and their contagion are there, or is it just summer?<sup>222</sup> With the possible dissolution of the apocalypse that they had always believed in, the sisters are simultaneously coming of age and uncovering the flaws at the heart of their upbringing. Sarah Graham writes:

The progress to maturity can celebrate a young character’s time and place or reveal its flaws [...] As protagonists weight the pressure to conform against the desire to be themselves, the true extent of their freedom is brought sharply into focus.<sup>223</sup>

When both the apocalypse and the geographical fact of their island crumble away from objective truth, the sisters must come to terms with the fact that their disastrously straitened existences arose as a result of a choice made by their parents, that they never owned their own bodies, minds, or truth. By realizing ‘the true extent of their freedom’, or lack thereof, the girls must take action for the first time and move from the passivity of their childhoods and the liminality of their prolonged adolescence to the brutal activity of adults. All of this is achieved by killing the men who were tasked with returning them to King, taking the ‘water cure’, and stepping over the barbed wire into the forest away from their ‘island’ home.<sup>224</sup> Their ability to leave is inextricably linked with coming to terms with their father and realising their existence outside of him. When told by James that ‘King considers your life here to be a failure’, Grace writes ‘I do not know what he means. Our lives are our lives’.<sup>225</sup> This is a decisive and unprecedented claim and—formatted as a paragraph (an island in the text around it)—encapsulates the direction that the girls will now go in, as people in their own right, rather than the cringing constructs and property of their parents and an

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<sup>220</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid., p. 176.

<sup>223</sup> Graham, p. 8.

<sup>224</sup> Day believes that ‘young women in [...] dystopian fiction embody liminality, straddling the lines of childhood and adulthood, of individuality and conformity, of empowerment and passivity’. p. 4.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid., p. 225.

imaginary apocalypse. The last line is representative of their new empowerment: 'We move into it with no fear'.<sup>226</sup>

All of the tropes above were enormously influential on *Wire Diamonds*, not least because of the links to be drawn between coming-of-age narratives, apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic fiction, and island settings.<sup>227</sup> It was the vacillating nature of islands; 'the imaginative dividend' garnered from their shifting from utopia to fortress and back again which was especially powerful.<sup>228</sup> Within *Wire Diamonds* there are multiple islands, both real and those islanded as a result of a combination of mechanisms that serve to fortress. There is a mainland, deserts over the water, there is even a homeland the narrators have never been to.<sup>229</sup> But to the narrators and other residents of the garrison there is barely anything outside of the wire, let alone the Island.<sup>230</sup> Within the Island, the garrison effectively functions as another island, a country within a country, with the four rings of protection mentioned earlier in Jesamy's narration. And inside their home, the family is controlled and islanded by Stephen. The silence of this mini-island is an obstruction against benign others being aware of the dysfunctional dynamics of their family.

The characters of my novel do not struggle through a massive loss of access to global information. Rather, they never had this. The novel is not specifically dated but is certainly set before smartphones and the 24-hour news cycle became commonplace phenomena. The televisions are tuned to the military channel, and the news of the island is in a different language.<sup>231</sup> More importantly, most of the information relevant to them is filtered through their controlling father, and the gossip mills of the garrison, with all the opportunities for twisted truths and deliberate lies that this entails. *The Water Cure* seems to switch from one story (the apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic) to another (a tale of cultic abuse) when the island disappears into the

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<sup>226</sup> Mackintosh, p. 248.

<sup>227</sup> Islands in fiction have been described by Kincaid as a 'theater of experiment' - p. 470; the Bildungsroman by Colin Wilson as 'a sort of laboratory in which the hero conducts an experiment in living', Wilson in Graham, p. 8; apocalyptic fiction by Trotta as 'textual Petri dishes in which we can experiment with any number of scenarios', p. 179.

<sup>228</sup> Kincaid, p. 463.

<sup>229</sup> Gilbert writes of TCKs 'They may also disassociate themselves from their home country, which they may call their "passport country"', p. 94.

<sup>230</sup> in this section, the country referred to as 'the island' by the narrators will be capitalised to differentiate it from other uses of the word.

<sup>231</sup> When the siblings watch the news it is 'segmented between the war report and sport', Thomas p.73, which suggests at the demographic of the news station audiences.

mainland it always was. The island that suddenly is no-longer-an-island feels like a trick of perspective, and I wanted to employ something of that technique in *Wire Diamonds* as well. Within the novel there needed to be a sense of the very real danger of the island and its smaller islands contained within, but embedded within that that they are also somehow unreal. This is where and why I started to pull away from the apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic. It was at this juncture that the positionality of the narrators became incredibly important to the book's logic, and, ultimately, genre. Had they been forced by circumstance to remain on the Island, the novel would have been situated far closer to the apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic genre. However, because they are in a position of privilege, the narrators get to leave the Island. Like dark tourists, they can experience the Island's disasters to a certain extent, before ultimately leaving the sites of devastation in favour of a safer home. The Island, for them, can cease being a fortress, and can offer a way out for them which is not possible for those people for whom the Island is home. To cement this point, the plot has the narrators escaping from the airport over the border, since Stephen lacks 'jurisdiction' on the north side of the island.<sup>232</sup> For the residents of both sides of this border, this crossing would never have been possible, and this act continues to make the Island a kind of playground for those with the requisite privilege to be able to play. There is an escape possible here which was intended to emulate the trick that Mackintosh employs with her island-that-is-not-an-island.

Mackintosh also engages with the prison/fortress dichotomy within her island, and this is something that I was most interested in when writing the final island of *Wire Diamonds*, which is the siblings themselves; a completely closed and self-reliant community of three. Within their small island of three there are complex psychological mechanisms that prevent them from accessing information outside of their current posting. There is the forgetting, and the taboo against speaking about the before-times and the other places that people move to.<sup>233</sup> The siblings are only trying to protect themselves from the psychic shocks of peripatetic childhoods, but the measures that they put in place might actually be quite extreme—bordering on cultish—and end up increasing the

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<sup>232</sup> Thomas, (not included in this thesis).

<sup>233</sup> Clever and Segal write that army children experience a 'stressful acclimation to a new environment where they may not have any friends and may be disconnected from school and community activities.' p. 28. When Benny speaks about the place he lived before, Jakey is shocked and jealous. The freedom with which Benny speaks suggests that the forgetting and the silence might actually not be as global as Jakey believes, but rather is a function of the closed-circuit triangle of his siblings.

isolation in which they live.<sup>234</sup> This last island is the one that provides the '(at once) positive separateness and negative alienation of the Self from the Other'.<sup>235</sup> The Other possesses much to fear; Stephen's abuse, a school full of bullies, a garrison of powerful men, intimidating soldiers and a system of misogyny and homophobia.<sup>236</sup> Additionally, these enemy Others tend to leave, and be replaced with, others on a frequent basis, so being islanded in a tight sibling group helps the siblings to avoid having to get to know anyone, or lose anyone. However, as Myers says, 'the smaller the island, of course, the greater that sense of entrapment'.<sup>237</sup> Where the alienation of their tiny island specifically develops into a problem for the characters is when the sibling bond prevents Jesamy from having any independence from Ash, and his 'guarding' of her becomes sinister and controlling.<sup>238</sup>

The awareness that my narrators have of their various islands are inexplicably entangled with their coming-of-age stories. At 14, 17 and 18, they 'occupy the liminal space between childhood and adulthood'.<sup>239</sup> And, whilst their travails are nowhere near as extreme as the ones the sister undergo in *The Water Cure*, they still must pass through challenges that are intellectual, physical, and possibly even spiritual, in order to reach maturity.<sup>240</sup> Just as her brief relationship with Theo became the enlightening force needed for Jesamy to see her positioning within the island's geo-politics, it is also the trigger for her coming-of-age journey since Theo is the catalyst who forces her to begin analysing her relationship with Ash. Meredith Miller writes that: 'In women's Bildung, we see an explicit negotiation of the self as desiring body'.<sup>241</sup> It is Jesamy's tentative steps into her consenting sexuality (distinct from her body being a site of dangerous attraction from older men) which serves to skew the novel's plot into its darker aspects and which ultimately leads to the

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<sup>234</sup> The isolation of small islands has been named 'psychological trauma' by Myers; Hassan writes that: 'there are dysfunctional family cults as well as a micro-cult, where one individual dominates and controls another'. p. 100.

<sup>235</sup> Kincaid, p. 463.

<sup>236</sup> The night that they run from their father, they retreat into the smallest island they can find: in their house, behind Jesamy's locked bedroom door, underneath the bed, with Ash 'stretched out on the furthest side, like a sentinel.' The sense of being islanded is switched from threatening—the violent homophobia of the garrison's society—to the only safety they know. It was important to position Ash as a sentinel, to mirror the watchful guards that surround the garrison.

<sup>237</sup> Myers.

<sup>238</sup> Ash writes: 'She'd never leave you, you know that. You're her brother, the other side of her, it'd be easier separating the front of a piece of paper from its back than separating her from you. But there's no harm in making sure.' Thomas, p.76.

<sup>239</sup> Day, p.4.

<sup>240</sup> McWilliams, p. 8.

<sup>241</sup> Meredith Miller, 'Lesbian, Gay and Trans Bildungsromane' in Graham (pp. 239-266) p. 241.

severance of her relationship with Ash. This severance is the way that she escapes the smallest island, and thus comes of age as a person in her own right.

In a similar vein to *The Water Cure*, *Wire Diamonds* is also heavily concerned with a coming-of-age theme involving the siblings' relationship with their father, since Stephen is the rigid, conservative face of the military milieu of the garrison.<sup>242</sup> Their eventual leaving of the island is predicated on their severing ties with Stephen. Jakey's coming-of-age, especially, is tied to both his relationship with his father, and his sexuality. Miller is of the opinion that sexuality is 'the interface between individual desires and social structures' which travels 'both inside and outside of family structures'.<sup>243</sup> Jakey's unspoken desire for Benny butts up against the deep taboo of queerness within the social structure of the garrison; in fact, it is such a threat to the hyper-masculinity of a military upbringing that it is policed by his peers. Additionally, whilst his feelings for Benny are private and outside of the family structure, they are also under intense scrutiny and pressure from his father by virtue of their perceived transgression from social norms. Jakey is able to come of age when he realises that his father's feelings of rage and disgust about his sexuality are not, in fact, the only way of responding to falling in love for the first time. Stephen's system of beliefs corresponds with the social structure of the garrison, just as King's system of beliefs correspond with his 'island', but they do not encapsulate the whole world. When Malina removes Jakey from this society and circle of influence, she gives him explicit and hitherto unimaginable permission to be himself.<sup>244</sup> Back in her home country, and freed from her damaging marriage to Stephen, she is able to give Jakey entrance to a society with which he can find a harmony without compromising his desires or identity.<sup>245</sup>

Via an engagement with islands and the coming-of-age tropes often found within apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic literature, I wanted *Wire Diamonds* to demonstrate that the teenage

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<sup>242</sup> Kincaid, p. 467.

<sup>243</sup> Miller, p. 240-1.

<sup>244</sup> Malina says of Jakey's relationship with Benny: 'You should not have had to keep him secret. And I should never have let Stephen ruin it for you. But it confirmed to me that I had to leave, and take you all with me, as soon as possible'. Thomas, (not included in this thesis).

<sup>245</sup> Ng writes that: 'Maturation occurs when synthesis is achieved between the individual and the broader social structure in which the individual must live. For Moretti, the key term for the Bildungsroman is harmony: an external harmony between the individual and wider society that is paralleled by an internal harmony between the individual's desire for freedom and society's necessary restraints on individual freedom.' p. 2170.

narrators both lack the agency of YA characters, and also have narrower objectives than saving or changing the world.

### 5. Abandoned Places and Lost Things

An important element of apocalyptic landscapes is the presence of abandoned places.<sup>246</sup> Writing on the zombie apocalypse in popular culture, Murphy believes that the tropes of 'emptiness, disorder and decay [are] communicated visually through empty streets and highways, abandoned cars, ransacked buildings and looted stores, cities and roads being reclaimed by wilderness'.<sup>247</sup> This links most pertinently with the upending of capitalism caused by the apocalyptic rift.<sup>248</sup> Buildings, with their tidy concept of ownership, are made senseless with ransacking; shops, having been looted, are no longer the staging posts of capitalist order; even cars and roads being undriveable are indicative that the great wheel of commerce has fallen still. In his work on the empty spaces in contemporary post-apocalyptic fiction, Martin Walter has written that the apocalypse bears 'striking structural similarities' with the Freudian concept of the uncanny.<sup>249</sup> He attributes this to a tension between familiarity and repulsion; homely places undergoing 'eerie changes' and becoming suddenly unhomely.<sup>250</sup>

Within the 'constellation', even when there isn't direct critique of capitalist spaces, the notion of ownership is often overturned by looting, which in turn points to the apocalyptic reasons for this. Emily St. John Mandel in *Station 11* and Sandra Newman in *The Country of Ice Cream Star* both interleave new rituals into the act of looting in order to acknowledge the reasons that these looted places are abandoned. In both novels, the schism is caused by a pandemic, and dead bodies are an unfortunate hazard of the job. When St. John Mandel's Travelling Symphony scout for

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<sup>246</sup> Martin Walter writes: 'representations of the post-apocalypse usually rely on settings that are increasingly depicted as abandoned, fragmented or disintegrated'. p. 133-4.

<sup>247</sup> Murphy, p. 47.

<sup>248</sup> Indeed, so interleaved are the ideas of capitalism and civilization in the cultural imaginary that Simon Schleusener believes that, in McCarthy's *The Road*, the end of capitalism must also coincide with the end of the world. 'The Dialectics of Mobility: Capitalism and Apocalypse in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*', *European journal of American studies*, 12.3, (2017) 1-16 (p. 8). He cites Slavoj Žižek's and/or Fredric Jameson's aphorism that 'it is easier today to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism'. p. 4.

<sup>249</sup> Walter, p. 137-8.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid.

instruments in an abandoned school, she represents the eerie uncanniness of the school by contrasting pre-pandemic student notes in mildewed binders—that read ‘Lady Gaga iz da bomb’, ‘Eva + Jason 4 evah’, ‘I ♥ Chris’—with graffitied messages on the walls from those using the school as a shelter or field hospital, such as ‘Jasmine L., if you see this, go to my dad’s lake house.—Ben’, and, ‘The end is here’.<sup>251</sup> The utter decay of the school suggests that all of the people writing these messages, whether oblivious student or refugee, are all dead. When Jackson finds a skeleton in the men’s room, August goes to find it, since ‘He likes to say a prayer over the dead’.<sup>252</sup> A similar kind of respect is afforded the dead in *The Country of Ice Cream Star*: when Ice Cream’s people come upon ‘sleepers’—‘Skeletons mix their ribs, their ghostly hair caught in one tangle’—in the evacuated house they loot, they must take nothing, since it is ‘unlucky wealth’ and it is not ‘good taboo’ to leave the house without burning it down.<sup>253</sup>

Importantly, in both novels, the looters take what they need—instruments, canned food, salt, alcohol, medicine, books, clothes, towels—leaving what they do not have a use for, without wilful destruction. There does appear to be some critique of fashion and consumption in *Station 11*; upon finding a photograph in a magazine of a woman wearing ‘precarious shoes’ and carrying ‘a dozen shopping bags’, the narrator notes dryly: ‘The pandemic would reach North America in less than a month’.<sup>254</sup> However, this may just be a comment on the obliviousness of the human populace before they were killed by the Georgia Flu, and an observation on how, in the post-apocalypse, shoes are recommended by their practicality, rather than any high-heeled fashionable precarity.

In *Gold Fame Citrus*, the emphasis on abandoned places and things shifts to something altogether more critical and pointed. The reason for this is linked directly to what caused the apocalypse in the first place—an unsustainable, consumption-driven capitalist logic rather than a devastating pandemic. In the empty, eerie landscapes of the apocalypse, places lose some meanings and gain others since the metric of worth from the before-times is upended.<sup>255</sup> Murphy writes of the

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<sup>251</sup> St. John Mandel, p. 130; p. 129.

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.* p. 129.

<sup>253</sup> Newman, p. 2.

<sup>254</sup> St. John Mandel, p. 200.

<sup>255</sup> ‘Under the rules of the apocalypse spaces are frequently shown to be emptied of their previous ideological symbolism—a phenomenon that is especially present in the appropriation of spaces of global capitalism’. Walter, p. 144. Eerie: The fact that these ruins are modern lends them a greater eeriness than modern ones, according to



emptiness and abandonment of such places: 'This iconography underscores not only that something has gone terribly wrong, but also that human rule of Earth has ended, or at least the comfortable, consumer-driven version of it, *due to some form of human excess or mishandling of affairs*.'<sup>256</sup>

The setting of the novel, California, is, as the title spells out, the home of gold, fame and citrus, but in the world of the novel this is historical rather than literal. It is a kind of post-apocalyptic joke since, in a state without water, gold is of far less worth than water (Luz's hatbox of cash is treated with casual disregard compared to her water-jug); squatters now live in the Hollywood homes of the rich and famous; and there is no longer a way for citrus to exist.<sup>257</sup> After the drought, the things that carried meaning no longer carry the same meaning and, in apocalyptic fashion, California is unveiled. Indeed, the city of Los Angeles becomes as significant to the novel as the characters.<sup>258</sup> LA, a place both factual and mythological, a physical reality and an endlessly reproduced idea, is an effective place to ruin. Characterised in the popular imagination by its output of infinitely reproduced images, the hyperreality of Hollywood is an effective erasure of the unsustainable 'settling' of the West that has led to this drought.<sup>259</sup> That billboard LA, overlaid on a palimpsest of other conceptions of place, is now only its own dry bones.<sup>260</sup> Whilst Watkins does wreck LA with waterlessness, it isn't done with a literary kind of 'establishing shot' that 'pans' over famous sites like the Hollywood sign, the multi-lane highways, the studios, Disneyland, Chateau Marmont, or Rodeo Drive. Instead, the narrator alludes to a universal wreckage by detailing more intimate and revealing objects and places, which are tasked with describing the state of LA as a whole.<sup>261</sup> Emily St. John Mandel has said of *Gold Fame Citrus*: 'This is a book that has Los Angeles and celebrity culture squarely in its sights', and Watkins takes aim at LA's celebrity culture

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Määttä in Trotta, p. 140.

<sup>256</sup> Murphy, p. 48, italics mine for emphasis.

<sup>257</sup> To convey how scarce a commodity fruit is, Luz and Ray pay \$200 for a can of blueberries on the black market, which are a 'tasteless mucus'. Watkins, p.25-6; p. 40.

<sup>258</sup> John R. Gold, in his essay about the city in sci-fi films, writes that cities are 'as much part of the action as the actors themselves'. under darkened skies, John R. Gold, 'Under Darkened Skies: The City in Science-fiction Film', *Geography*, 86.4 (2001) 337-345 (p. 342).

<sup>259</sup> In Baudrillard's scathing *America* trans.by Chris Turner (London and New York: Verso, 1999) he describes America itself as a 'hyperreality' p. 28. He describes LA as 'insane circulation without desire.' p. 124; and states that 'Everything is destined to reappear as simulation.' p. 32

<sup>260</sup> Place as palimpsestic: Tyler, p. 6; L. Buell, p. 73.

<sup>261</sup> As Jerry Määttä says: '[...] even though the disaster is often portrayed locally, it is, as a general rule, alluded to as being global and all-encompassing.' Trotta, p. 150.

by opening the novel in an abandoned mansion owned by an unnamed 'starlet'.<sup>262</sup> The combination of prestige, aura, and privilege that enabled a 'starlet' to own a glass mansion in the Hollywood hills is now defunct. Her mansion is still filled with 'unspeakably expensive' status-items of clothing and jewellery that are lost to her, and whose meaning is also lost; they now quite literally have no price, since they are useless next to the need for water.<sup>263</sup> Their previous preciousness is subverted when Luz plays with the things, discards them, destroys them. She wears elaborate party dresses with rubber galoshes, to sweat and chase rodents in.<sup>264</sup> A fur coat lies in the dirt when it becomes too hot to wear.<sup>265</sup> Unworn shoes are dumped out of boxes so as to house the corpse of a gopher.<sup>266</sup> Jewelled sandals are used to dance in at a dusty rave.<sup>267</sup> A silk camisole is used to make a dress for Ig, cinched with a scrunchie.<sup>268</sup> Perhaps most sharp-edged of the jokes played on these items is the fact that Luz uses silk *Hermès* scarves as makeshift diapers for Ig. She doesn't even wash and reuse them; after changing Ig, Luz allows the scarves to 'flap down into the shitting hole'.<sup>269</sup> As if to acknowledge their lost worth, Ray says, 'Should we keep those?', but Luz replies, 'She has a million of them'.<sup>270</sup> The aura of precious objects is undermined first by the gaucheness of the starlet having 'a million' of them, so, to Luz at least, they are disposable.<sup>271</sup>

There is a commentary in destroying wildly expensive goods, since, as Christopher Todd Anderson says: 'taking pleasure in commodities such as a Chanel garment or a pair of brand-name tennis shoes requires repressing certain kinds of knowledge'.<sup>272</sup> He goes on to explain that this repression involves a particular kind of unknowing regarding the 'origins of our goods, the people who make them, their working conditions, and those workers' inability to own the very

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<sup>262</sup> Emily St. John Mandel, 'Book Review: *Gold Fame Citrus* by Claire Vaye Watkins', *The New York Times* (2015) <<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/04/books/review/gold-fame-citrus-by-claire-vaye-watkins.html>> [accessed 31.05.2020]

<sup>263</sup> Watkins, p. 1.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*, p.51

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>271</sup> Aura in a Benjaminian sense: Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' *Illuminations* trans. by Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999) pp. 211-235 (p. 217).

<sup>272</sup> Christopher Todd Anderson, 'Post-Apocalyptic Nostalgia: *WALL-E*, Garbage, and American Ambivalence toward Manufactured Goods', *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory*, 23. 3 (2012) 267-282 (p. 267).

consumer goods they help manufacture'.<sup>273</sup> This starlet appears to have been one of these willingly unknowing people, who was trapped in a cycle of consuming and being consumed. Indeed, being a 'starlet' (both feminised and reduced by the diminutive) rather than an actor or artist, she will have been representative of a certain type of feminine ideal that is irretrievably intertwined with commodity.<sup>274</sup> This is hinted at in the size of her clothes, the tininess of which will at one point have had a meaning that is now lost. Luz, a former 'mid-tier model', muses on the diamond tennis bracelet she is wearing: 'Like dewdrops strung around her wafer wrist, something the photographers would have said. But practically everyone was thin now'.<sup>275</sup> In the dried up reality of drought, the prized slenderness of celebrity has nothing against which to find itself superior, since being thin has passed from the elite to the malnourished masses.

Hsuan L. Hsu and Bryan Yazell believe that 'Historically, US-led patterns of production, consumption, and militarization have been a driving force behind twentieth- and twenty-first century environmental crises', and, in *Gold Fame Citrus*, a scene at an abandoned mall illustrates this point clearly.<sup>276</sup> Luz is living with Levi's tribe when she spots in the sunrise 'A mirage, surely, but a queer one: dollhouse silhouettes, gingerbread houses all in a tidy row...'<sup>277</sup> The strangeness of this view suggests radical climate change; a fairy-tale scene of a snowy northern European village in a land of burning sand. But when it is revealed to be a commercial Christmas outlet—'NORTH POLE OUTLETS, a sign reassured her'—, it actually says far more about the society that inhabited this place before the drought.<sup>278</sup> The twee composite winter-wonderland style of the place, with its 'eaves dolloped with plaster snow', referring to a nostalgic and entirely imaginary past, is actually a mechanism by which people could have turned away from the plasticized commercial reality of Christmas.<sup>279</sup> Todd Anderson states that: 'The aura of nostalgia veils the fact that most of what we

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<sup>273</sup> Anderson, after Billig, p. 278.

<sup>274</sup> 'Even the word "model" is a weird word, like a model car. That's a thing, an object. A lot of women, especially very young women, are told it's their job to be a thing'. Mcauley.

<sup>275</sup> 'Model': Watkins, p. 10; 'thin', p. 4.

<sup>276</sup> Hsu L. Hsuan and Bryan Yazell. 'Post-Apocalyptic Geographies and Structural Appropriation', *Journal of Transnational American Studies*, 10.2, (2019) 347-356 (p. 347).

<sup>277</sup> Watkins, p. 176.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176; As Elizabeth Bullen and Elizabeth Parsons write: 'What the imagined space and time of science fiction thus offer the reader is not a vision of a possible future, but an interrogation of the present.' 'Dystopian Visions of Global Capitalism: Philip Reeve's *Mortal Engines* and M.T Anderson's *Feed*', *Children's Literature in Education*, 38 (2007) 27—139 (p. 128).

<sup>279</sup> Watkins, p.177.

buy is garbage-to-be, despite the significant financial and environmental costs of those goods'.<sup>280</sup> The allusion that the outlet mall is abandoned because of the apocalypse possibly gives credence to the idea that there is something ouroboric and pointless about it all. After all, the 'plastic presents' are implicated alongside a wide variety of other factors in the very existence of the Amargosa that is now destroying this version of 'civilisation'.<sup>281</sup> The fact that this marker of 'civilisation' has been abandoned due to the monstrous superdune it helped create, also up-ends the concept of progress being 'a single evolutionary scale of development of society from less to more developed'.<sup>282</sup> This California, previously a 'developed' place, has ultimately crumpled under the very pressures its development led to, and become a wasteland.<sup>283</sup> Through the character of Ig, who is likely to have never been schooled in 'seasonal' consumption, Watkins kills the great tower of commerce that is Christmas by making it meaningless to its intended demographic: 'In one courtyard cul-de-sac they found Santa's Village, maze of plastic presents, one nutcracker sentinel toppled. Ig was uninterested. They went on'.<sup>284</sup> Instead of behaving with unrestrained excitement at the chance to go shopping for free, there is an ambivalence caused by the emptiness of this consumerist playground.<sup>285</sup> Noticeably absent is the 'utopian fantasy of freedom that consumer culture is able to supply'.<sup>286</sup> Face to face with a disappeared society, there has been enough time and distance to actually see it, and the damage it has done, instead of merely grieving or feeling nostalgia for it.<sup>287</sup> Aligning more with the Travelling Symphony and Ice Cream's looting, the things that the colony take are items of worth in their world of survival: batteries and electronics, linens, shoes.<sup>288</sup> However, even these items are not totally welcome; the electronics

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<sup>280</sup> Anderson, p. 272.

<sup>281</sup> As Bullen and Parsons write: 'Scarcity is no longer the most significant problem in the West; in its place capitalist expansion is creating chemical, nuclear, ecological and lifestyle risks'. This also refers to Murphy's idea that the world as it was has ended due to some 'form of human excess'. Murphy, p. 48; as well as Hsu and Yazell's point about America's patterns of production and consumption, p.347; and Teresa Heffernan writes of apocalyptic fiction that 'many are trapped in a nostalgia for a past, the very past that led to the catastrophe', Teresa Heffernan 'The Post-Apocalyptic Imaginary: Science, Fiction, and the Death Drive', *English Studies in Africa*, 58. 2, (2015) 66-79 (66); Salmose writes that nostalgia is in 'the retreat to conservative ideals', p. 1426.

<sup>282</sup> John Urry, in Bullen and Parsons, p. 130.

<sup>283</sup> In a similar manner, Jordan J. Dominy writes that McCarthy's *The Road* '[...] envisions a United States resulting from an utter drive to consume and can be read as a grim, extreme parable warning of an entire globe commodified and converted to waste (a literal dust heap of history)'. 'Cannibalism, Consumerism, and Profanation: Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and the End of Capitalism', *The Cormac McCarthy Journal* 13, (2015) 143-158 (p. 144).

<sup>284</sup> Watkins, p. 177.

<sup>285</sup> Walter, p. 144.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>287</sup> Again, this hearkens back to an idealised version of a past that depends on 'patriarchal and imperialist norms.' Watkins, p. 7.

<sup>288</sup> Watkins, p. 177.

are 'contraptions Luz had not seen for a long time and had not missed'.<sup>289</sup> This whole section reads as a critique of consumer culture. This abandoned outpost of capitalism—once so seemingly unshakeable—is revealed to be something illusory (first mistaken for a mirage) and is not to be trusted in the desert; the colony hadn't found it on their scouting the night before, and, as one colonist notes: 'Things aren't so reliable out here. The dune could take this place by sundown'.<sup>290</sup> This gives credence to the idea of the dune as a devouring mouth, ironically and inevitably consuming consumer culture itself, thereby burying the West.

There is also a marked ironic effect of describing this abandoned mall in the middle of the desert with natural (especially water-related) similes: 'forest-green trash cans', 'sending glass down like rain', 'through one such waterfall'.<sup>291</sup> It forces the missing water front and centre, and, by default, questions the folly that has led to the drought. The only nature there is fake, and is so by design: there is a carousel which has tigers, cheetahs, ostriches, eagles, jackrabbits, camels, giraffes, pandas and dolphins.<sup>292</sup> However, interspersed with these there are dragons and mermaids and unicorns which, in a world of multiple extinctions, are just as real and just as false as the other animals.<sup>293</sup> Ig, a baby of a droughted city, is likely to have no real way of telling mythical animals from those that are now only historical. It seems as though Watkins, through using a carousel to communicate the terrifying reality of drought and disappeared nature, is pointing to the fact that humans have managed to destroy nature for their children. The 'safety and nostalgia of childhood' represented here by the broken carousel is disturbed by images of abandonment and decay.<sup>294</sup>

The attitude towards things in *The Water Cure* is different again from the treatments given by St John Mandel, Newman and Watkins in their novels. This is because in *The Water Cure* there is a marked departure from the theme of nomadism employed in the other novels of the constellation, which enables the characters/narrators, and therefore the reader, to see a wider view of the post-

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<sup>289</sup> Ibid.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid., p. 178.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid., p.177.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid., p.178.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid.

<sup>294</sup> Dominic W. Lennard, 'All fun and games...: children's culture in the horror film, from *Deep Red* (1975) to *Child's Play* (1988),' *Continuum*, 26:1, (2012) 133-142, (p. 135).

apocalyptic world.<sup>295</sup> In fact, only Sarah Hall's *Daughters of the North* approaches it in terms of its stationary setting.<sup>296</sup> Because of the illusory nature of the toxic apocalypse of *The Water Cure*, there isn't actually a post-apocalyptic landscape to explore outside of the 'island'. Therefore, there are no markers of a ruined civilisation, no abandoned mega-malls, no branded items nodding to capitalism, no empty houses full of variously valuable objects, no cadavers in beds to say prayers over. Instead of exploring the world, the girls continually loop in and around the hotel, the pool, each other's bedrooms, and, more pertinently, within the games and rituals of their abuse. Their landscape is overwhelmingly interior. There is no critique of capitalism or consumer-driven culture since it was not this that pulled down the world. In fact, being completely ignorant of the 'real world', the girls are unaware of the systems of capitalism that may be thriving only miles from their 'island'.

However, they do have deep connections to objects. Bjørn Schiermer Anderson writes that: 'objects help to structure the specific situations of our social life'.<sup>297</sup> Their social life requires objects, just as the social life of the pre-apocalypse California of *Gold Fame Citrus* required objects, but the difference in their milieu means that the objects that they form attachments to are the items of ritual instead of the markers of wealth and status to be found in the consumer world. Like the latter, they play a large role in describing and critiquing the sisters' reality, since their cultic beliefs are enabled and based around these objects: the swimming pool which they use to play the drowning game; the fainting sacks, the lengths of iron they meditate upon and which 'choose' who will not be loved that year. When King (the procurer of their things) disappears, they fear their stocks growing lower, but the things they focus on are all related to their cultic abuse: razor blades for self-mutilation, the canned fruit and condensed milk they live off, the soap they use obsessively to wash toxicity off. They feel reassured that the salt they use in their purges and to burn away toxicity will not run out since they harvest it themselves. Interestingly, there are no branded products, and they do not know enough to question the production of mass-produced items, nor

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<sup>295</sup> As Tate writes: 'The future imagined by post-catastrophe [...] is frequently defined by a kind of enforced, continual motion'. Tate, p. 83. Schleusener also writes about mobility and the motif of the road in his article.

<sup>296</sup> Even then, there actually *is* a world outside of Carhullan farm.

<sup>297</sup> Bjørn Schiermer Andersen, 'Quasi-objects, Cult Objects and Fashion Objects: On two Kinds of Fetishism on Display in Modern Culture', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 28.1, (2011) 81-102 (p. 83).

wonder at the terms of their procurement.<sup>298</sup> In one disturbing scene, the sisters meditate on the word 'Tramadol', and Lia thinks of 'the small white pills, small blue pills, the glass of water, the brown glass bottle'.<sup>299</sup> The significance of the medication is revealed to the reader slowly, when the girls recall different times they were medicated by Mother, including for an entire week after King disappeared.<sup>300</sup> When Mother disappears, and thus abandons her room, they find pills in her cabinet: 'Tramadol. Olanzapine. Diazepam'.<sup>301</sup> Even the medications are generics, lacking the capitalist and cultural significance that pharmaceutical trade names would have (with Valium, especially). Several stages below any such brand-recognition, the girls do not understand the names or how they would act on them, and therefore are unaware of just quite how much of their drowsy acquiescence and dependence on their parents are related to opioids, antipsychotics and tranquilizers, to say nothing of the frequent unexplained physical and mental weaknesses they experience as a likely result of either side effects or withdrawal symptoms. Here, the pills are not just objects imbued with strange and mystical powers, they point directly to how Mother and King pharmaceutically kept three young women docile and captive. There is also, in them, the hint that either Mother or King or both, were mentally unwell to the extent that they were prescribed a cocktail of medications. The pills, along with the other objects of *The Water Cure*, are revealing of the sisters and their story of abuse, far more than they reveal the 'apocalyptic' world around them.

Lost things and abandoned or ruined places are a repeated feature in *Wire Diamonds*, and there was an effort to pitch their significance somewhere below the anti-capitalist destruction of luxury goods in *Gold Fame Citrus* (since they have no especial moral or political compunctions around things) and the necessary and semi-respectful looting of *Station 11* and *The Country of Ice Cream Star* (since they are the victors in any competition for resources), and align more closely with the things of *The Water Cure*, inasmuch as they reveal things about the narrators and their inner worlds.<sup>302</sup> There is a scene in which the narrators visit the mountains and discover a ruined hotel

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<sup>298</sup> There is much discussion of the implications of the naming of the can of Coca-Cola the father and son find in *The Road*, ranging from brand-fetishisation; the seeming inescapability of branded mass-produced products, even in an apocalypse; and consumer-behaviour in a situation of limits. Schleusener, p. 6-7.

<sup>299</sup> Mackintosh, p. 159.

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>302</sup> Their status as Army dependents makes them automatic beneficiaries of the garrison's resource prosperity.

and abandoned huts. The ruined hotel was only half-built when it was deserted, meaning there was never actually a completed building to fall into a ruin. Instead, it dangles somewhere in-between built and collapsing.<sup>303</sup> Initially, to Ash and Jakey, it is just another half-finished, empty thing.<sup>304</sup> To Jesamy, however, it is a place of extreme unease—‘through the trees I saw something that sent a prickle of warning up the backs of my arms’—and it isn’t until she goes to the back of the building that she discovers that it has been partially destroyed by artillery.<sup>305</sup> I wanted this section to suggest ruinous abandonment, just like the other abandoned places on the island, but, riddled with the marks of armed conflict, wanted it also to be ‘perverted by apocalyptic signs’.<sup>306</sup> The narrators’ understanding of what happened in this place is initially partial; I wanted to employ the technique of listing the things that are lost or destroyed to get closer to the history of the place, but, instead of revealing those who left the litter, I wanted it to reveal the siblings instead. In the abandoned hut, Jesamy hands found items to Ash:

Key rusted away from itself. Two-pin plug and frayed wire. Battery. Can of lighter fluid. Slice of glass. Tin of tomatoes with a use-by-date older than you. You can’t hold it all so line it up along a blasted windowsill. Lighter fluid falls off with a clang but she keeps handing you stuff. Bullet-casings, lots. Pine-cone. Yellowing porno. Syringe with no needle thankfuck.<sup>307</sup>

Of these items, the pornography and the tin of tomatoes with a use-by-date older than Ash are the only things of use in dating the scene. I wanted to do with the pornography what Guffey attributes to the retro, namely make it something that “quotes styles from the past, but applies them in anomalous settings” and thus “regards the past from a bemused distance,” perhaps with dark humor’.<sup>308</sup> Ash later crudely points out: ‘That’s 70s bush if I ever saw it’.<sup>309</sup> When it comes to other elements of the disaster-litter, the narrators’ histories and identities are similarly revealed, since the bullet-casings make sense to them and conflict is the first conclusion that they draw as to the wreckage of the place. It is not surprising to the narrators that this should be a place scarred by

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<sup>303</sup> Orvell cites Alois Riegl’s conception of buildings as things that seem somehow inorganic, permanent, solid, and yet which are also subject to change— to organic processes which eventually lead to the transition from building into dust and rubble. p. 648. A ruin is thus something in-between these seemingly irreconcilable states; a halfway, an unbecoming.

<sup>304</sup> Emptiness: Walter calls this ‘the threatening character of emptiness’. p. 137.

<sup>305</sup> Thomas, (not included in this thesis).

<sup>306</sup> Barros-Grela and Bobadilla Pérez in Walter, p. 137.

<sup>307</sup> Thomas, (not included in this thesis).

<sup>308</sup> Guffey in Todd Anderson, pp. 276-7.

<sup>309</sup> Thomas, (not included in this thesis).



war; after all, they live on a military garrison that exists to provide personnel for active deployment.

<sup>310</sup> However, as soon as there is the threat of land-mines, the narrators are thrust out of their studied indifference towards combat, and into real, sickening fear. In this scene I wanted to take a step towards the danger of apocalyptic places such as the mine-riddled Quantico/Washington of *The Country of Ice Cream Star*, and the formerly idyllic British countryside of *How I Live Now*. I wanted the narrators to go through that loss of innocence or privilege that Ice Cream and Daisy went through when they discovered that places contain real, devastating threat. After doing that, though, I stepped back down again and restored their teenage invincibility. When the narrators discover that the hotel and the mine-strewn ground around are scenes in a military training ground, they return to their levity; the simulacra of it making it somehow emptier than would have been a hotel trapped inside a 'real' conflict, and the familiarity of war-games putting them at ease. The ruin is, of course, not entirely fake—indeed, the artillery fire poured onto the hotel would have been very real and the war they were rehearsing will probably have taken place, albeit elsewhere—creating a kind of local apocalypse for those involved. However, the fact that the landmines are not real means that the narrators, in this moment, like dark tourists, are enabled to side-step the full horror of war, just as they also side-step the full meaning of the power-station explosion.

## 6. Destruction, Wilderness, and Elements of the Sublime

When it comes to destruction, the apocalypse tends to affect iconic or emblematic places—such as the golden gate bridge, the Hollywood sign or the statue of liberty—making the destruction of them stand in for more widespread collapse.<sup>311</sup> This ensures that the ruination is imaginatively effective, even if the reader had never been there.<sup>312</sup> The wreckage of a city is a common trope of apocalyptic fiction, since there is the potential for the most severe damage done to 'the most

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<sup>310</sup> Williamson and others write that military children have 'indirect exposure to and awareness of conflict and violence'. p. 1.

<sup>311</sup> Trotta, p. 131; Salmose, p. 1421.

<sup>312</sup> In fact, L. Buell states, 'The fact that the imaginer hasn't been there and maybe never will [be] hardly lessens the intensity of such storied or imaged places to induce longing and loyalty'. p. 73.

elaborate spatial structures' such as bridges, skyscrapers, national monuments, and neighbourhoods.<sup>313</sup>

Newman, in *The Country of Ice Cream Star*, attacks the capital city of the US using Washington DC as the battleground on which is fought a deeply political final war for freedom. In a self-destructive mechanism, the Marines escape the District and set fires which detonate rings of ammunition surrounding it. This leads to the image of Ice Cream standing on a bridge, watching the city burn: 'I be the only living child in Washington'.<sup>314</sup> She goes on to write:

When I look back to Washington, be only smoke to see [...] Cannot see the palaces, but the whitish monument stand clean apart without no hurt. Be like a simple burial stone for this whole murdern city.<sup>315</sup>

Washington, with its 'palaces' and monument, is both an elaborate spatial structure, but is also emblematic of power and democracy, and therefore surrounded by fire it is evocative of apocalyptic destruction.<sup>316</sup>

In terms of the post-apocalypse, the cataclysm is indicated by 'wrecked urban environments', such as the 'whole blocks of boarded up buildings burning in Los Angeles' in Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, or the 'uninhabitable' London under floodwater of Hunter's *The End We Start From*.<sup>317</sup> For those novels set in rural or semi-rural areas, this could be extrapolated as a 'renascent nature' overturning organised or productive countryside.<sup>318</sup> In Hall's *Daughters of the North*, there are flooded houses, destroyed roads, rhododendrons taking over the fields, 'a thick green creeper that had wound its way up the telephone poles and round the trunks of trees'.<sup>319</sup> The idea of roads 'reclaimed by wilderness' is a frequent theme, and seems to be a way of returning the land to a state when humans didn't have complete dominion; making it much harder for them to cross it at will by road, rail or air.<sup>320</sup> *Station 11* features a highway that 'was miles of permanent gridlock,

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<sup>313</sup> As Orvell says, 'to see [cities] in ruins is the stuff of science fiction films. When the monster comes or the meteor strikes, it is always the city that is attacked because there one finds the densest population, (bridges and skyscrapers), the greatest potential for mass destruction'. p. 648.

<sup>314</sup> Newman, p. 603-4.

<sup>315</sup> Ibid.

<sup>316</sup> The images emerging from the 2021 storming of the US Capitol pay credence to the idea that such monuments possess great symbolic power when they are sites of rioting or vandalism.

<sup>317</sup> Apel, p. 136-7; Butler p. 18; Hunter, p. 8.

<sup>318</sup> Polefrone, p. 259.

<sup>319</sup> Hall, p. 10, p. 9, p. 19.

<sup>320</sup> Murphy, p. 47; There is an interesting exploration in Winton's *Island Home*, about how landscape is subjugated by air travel. p. 139, p. 135-7.

small trees growing now between cars and thousands of windshields reflecting the sky'.<sup>321</sup> This enforced shift from land that is subjugated and put to use as a highway, to a permanently static forest of cars and trees turns an "urban 'normality'" into an "uncanny wilderness"; something that is familiar and yet, with its use subverted, becomes suddenly wild and strange.<sup>322</sup> Within apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic fiction the concept of wilderness seems to be cast in an opposition to the human characters, described by Gary K. Wolfe as 'the re-emergence of the wilderness as antagonist'.<sup>323</sup> It is not surprising that wilderness is considered a dangerous enemy to human civilization and therefore representative of the apocalypse; tracing wilderness back to colonialism sees it represented as a powerful, disorderly threat to the colonial impulse for order and control.<sup>324</sup> Kylie Crane writes: 'Within colonial discourse wilderness was presented as a space outside civilized social order and Christian moral laws, the place of mysterious and threatening otherness'.<sup>325</sup> The reduction of enormous, complex, symbolically and ecologically rich places to blank space or 'terra nullius', served as a convenient erasure of the Indigenous cultures who had a conflicting conception of a place to the colonisers, and laid the land and people open to exploitation.<sup>326</sup>

In *Gold Fame Citrus*, Watkins takes the concept of wilderness and folds it into the Amargosa, whilst also using it as something subversive and critical of the colonial history it wipes out. The Amargosa is a monstrously huge dune sea formed from the dust and sand of a desertified landscape. It is named after the first mountain range that it swallowed, and it moves at will, erasing communities and landscapes with ease.<sup>327</sup> The Amargosa subverts a colonial impulse to 'bring order', since it cannot be felled, dammed, mined, flattened, farmed, fracked, or drilled. The dune is essentially

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<sup>321</sup> St. John Mandel, p. 144.

<sup>322</sup> Petter Skult, 'The Role of Place in the Post-Apocalypse: Contrasting *The Road* and *World War Z*', *Studia Neophilologica*, 87.1, (2015) 104-115 (p.104).

<sup>323</sup> Polefrone, p. 259. Spirn also states that wilderness was formerly known as a 'terrifying symbol of chaos'. p. 18

<sup>324</sup> As Robert Macfarlane says '[...] wilderness has been perceived as a dangerous force that confounds the order-bringing pursuits of human culture and agriculture'. Robert Macfarlane, *The Wild Places* (London: Granta, 2008), p. 30.

<sup>325</sup> Crane, p. 73.

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.* It is at this juncture that I am very aware that this reflection doesn't engage specifically with the future possibilities inherent in Indigenous Futurism, AfricanFuturism, Africanjuism, or Afrofuturism. This essay, exploring as it does a very specific type of ignorance related to the age and military milieu of the teenage narrators, does not tackle colonialism head-on and therefore I felt that the scope wasn't sufficiently large enough to do academic justice to such fields.

<sup>327</sup> Watkins, p. 118.

useless, and thus tallies with Robert Macfarlane's conception of wilderness: 'Wild places resist conversion to human use, and they must therefore be destroyed or overcome'.<sup>328</sup> For all that, the Amargosa cannot be poisoned, blasted, burnt, or otherwise overcome. It cannot be rerouted. At the very best, there can be an attempt to follow it (as do Levi's tribe). And it cannot be destroyed, for the simple fact that it is made of destruction. There is an irony to the Amargosa's wildness, since, like so many of the cataclysms of post-apocalyptic fiction (pandemic, bio-terrorism, drought, flood, rogue artificial intelligence, nuclear fallout, corporatism) the monster is man-made, and only becomes monstrous when it overwhelms its creators.<sup>329</sup> Perhaps the most uncomfortable aspect of the dune sea is that it cannot be known, since, being a moveable entity, it cannot be pinned down, explored or penetrated, not even from the narrator's powerful vantage point above the earth. This means that it is also resistant to the colonial drive to impose sense on a landscape. It cannot even serve as 'terra nullius' proper and put to profit. Instead of all of this, like wilderness, the Amargosa 'acts or moves freely without restraint; is unconfined, unrestricted'.<sup>330</sup> It is unpredictable, fickle and does not give any indication of where it will go next, and when. It is wild land, since it 'can be said to be *self-willed* land.'<sup>331</sup>

In praise of *Gold Fame Citrus*, Justine Jordan describes the Amargosa as:

[...] the dune sea rising above the earth, ever-growing, ever-moving, unmappable, unknowable, burying everything in its path. Too vast for human comprehension, yet at the same time a tabula rasa for each fragile individual's desires, it's a classic example of the Romantic sublime, as mesmerising as it is deadly.<sup>332</sup>

The idea of the Romantic sublime is something that is used in apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic narratives to signify the power of destruction.<sup>333</sup> Tajinder Singh Hayer, working with a very similar sense of the Romantic sublime, writes that post-apocalyptic narratives:

[...] feature iconic locales destroyed or transformed into colossal memento mori. Or

<sup>328</sup> Macfarlane, p. 30.

<sup>329</sup> Claisse and Delvenne attribute 'anticipatory knowledge' to apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic narratives: 'Dystopian authors act as whistleblowers of a special kind [...] they have to be credible, since they are the first to witness the forerunners of the catastrophe and strive to convince us of the emergency.' Frédéric Claisse and Pierre Delvenne, 'Building on anticipation: Dystopia as empowerment', *Current Sociology*, 63.2, (2015) 155-169 (p. 157)

<sup>330</sup> Macfarlane, p. 30.

<sup>331</sup> Ibid.

<sup>332</sup> Justine Jordan, 'Gold Fame Citrus by Claire Vaye Watkins Review — A Wild Trip in the American West', *The Guardian* (2016) <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/feb/10/gold-fame-citrus-by-claire-vaye-watkins-review>> [accessed 2.07.2020].

<sup>333</sup> 'The Sublime' in *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of British Literature*, ed. by David Scott Kastan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) <<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195169218.001.0001/acref-9780195169218-e-0453>> [accessed 02.07.2020].

worlds where even those reminders have been scrubbed clean from the map leaving a landscape that is implacable; the nightmare that lies at the heart of Romantic notions of the sublime—a sight that threatens to crush the individual with its scale.<sup>334</sup>

The Amargosa is the perfect example of Singh Hayer's understanding of apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic destruction, especially with its crushing, implacable might and dizzying scale. It is so overwhelmingly huge that Watkins must switch her third-person narration from its usual centring on Luz to sweep out into a wider view of it. When Luz and Ray drive inland they come upon their first sight of the dune: 'Above those spoilt purple mountains materialized a glowing wedge of light, whiter than the sun, thin, blurred, and radiant. Snow, Luz thought, unable to stop herself.'<sup>335</sup> As readers we are taken with Luz as she imagines snow in the middle of a waterless state, then in pieces we are led to the reality:

It throbbed with heat, glowed radioactive with light. Luz said, 'What is that?' just as the answer came to her.  
Ray said it. 'The dune sea, the Amargosa.'  
'It's that close?' They were barely beyond the city.  
Ray shook his head. 'It's that big.'  
This knocked Luz off balance: The dune was not atop the empurpled range before them but beyond it, beyond it by miles and miles. The white was not a rind of ice, not a snowcap, but sand piling up inland where the Mojave had been.<sup>336</sup>

Luz's shock at its immensity can become the reader's shock as we are positioned there in the car with them, imagining simple, impossible snow, instead of a monstrous wall of sand and dust many times larger and much more powerful than a mountain range. As David Scott Kastan argues, 'A sublime experience most often describes the relationship between subjective sensations and an incomprehensible world'.<sup>337</sup> It is an effective technique to keep the reader in the car with Luz and Ray, so that we too, can experience an element of this sublime through the battle of Luz's subjectivity versus the immeasurability of the dune.

It is still not enough to fully appreciate the enormity of the Amargosa, and Watkins later moves into a thirteen-page description of the dune sea, far from Luz and Ray's story. The narrator becomes much freer, with the cinematic power to 'zoom out' from the earth with aeronautic speed; the reader

<sup>334</sup> Tajinder Singh Hayer, 'North Country: An English Post-Apocalyptic Landscape', *Foundation*, 46.128 (2017), 48-59 (p. 48).

<sup>335</sup> Watkins, p. 84.

<sup>336</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84-5

<sup>337</sup> Kastan.

is taken with the narrator to a vantage point high above the earth, and interpellated into the narrator's first-person plural 'we' in grappling with the scale of the dune sea.<sup>338</sup> This section begins with: 'From space it seems a canyon.'<sup>339</sup>

From this 'imagined sky-perch', the narrator establishes a scale by describing the nearby Grand Canyon as 'That hair on the lens, that mote in the vision, that teensy capillary'.<sup>340</sup> From this, the reader can begin to appreciate just how massive the dune sea is, appearing as a canyon from space whereas the actual Grand Canyon is only a thread on a picture. From there, having a better grasp on scale, the narrator inverts this initial perception of the dune as canyon by saying: 'The vast bleached gash we once took for chasm protrudes; the formation pops from canyon to mountain'.<sup>341</sup> There are several mentions of how hard this mental trick is to comprehend, using phrases such as 'optical lurch', 'the mind lurches vertiginous', 'the eyebrain swoons'.<sup>342</sup> The swooping, sickening way that this is described with lurching and swooning mirrors the narrator's assertion that '[...] scale is a fearsome thing. Scale is analogy. When understood correctly, scale expresses itself mostly in the bowels.'<sup>343</sup> What the narrator is describing here is visceral, known more in the guts—that low centre of fear and animal instinct—than the loftier eye or brain. Any partial understanding of the Amargosa involves a form of somatisation, since it cannot be captured in one photograph, cannot be pinned down and simply seen.<sup>344</sup> There is an element of sentience to the Amargosa, and it creates a strange, siren-like force-field around itself. In the people around it, the Amargosa inspires an uneasy interplay of awe and fear that has a physical pull on them: there are a series of testimonials where people are 'hypnotized by fertiliser dust and saline particulate and the pulverized bones of ancient sea creatures'; there is a 'magnetic incandescence working the way the moon did, tugging at the iron in their blood'; they are 'transfixed by the immaculate flaxen range'; it is 'chemical, pheromonal, elemental, a tingle of ions in the brain'.<sup>345</sup> Accounts of it border on worshipful; there are cults set up around it, people who refuse to leave it, people who

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<sup>338</sup> An interesting exploration of this 'zoom out' is in Salmose, pp. 1415-16.

<sup>339</sup> Watkins p. 113.

<sup>340</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114

<sup>341</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>342</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>343</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>344</sup> The narrator actually references this by saying: 'Perhaps the ugliest of our impulses, to shove the sublime through a pinhole.' *Ibid.*

<sup>345</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85, p. 124.

literally cannot draw their eyes away:

It was so bright, like a light I'd never seen before. I felt very full then, and couldn't take my eyes off it. When we passed out of sight I felt just bereft, like someone I loved was dead. I've come to realise I need that full feeling. Very full, but also incredibly calm, like heaven, or the rush of warmth before you freeze to death.<sup>346</sup>

There seems to be a helpless reverence for the sheer power and large-scale and irreversible damage of the Amargosa, and it is here that Watkins folds in a critique of the practices that led to the 'settling' of the West. After all, the destruction that the Amargosa wreaks on the West only mirrors the path of the 'settlers' who swept through the land, engaging in genocide against the people, cultures and ecosystems already present.<sup>347</sup> *Gold Fame Citrus* confirms Hermann's statement that 'the apocalypse features dangers that people are "actually already aware of"'.<sup>348</sup> The dark future it describes already exists as reality in the US, since water being denied to members of contemporary society is not a new concept; the right to water already has a long, dark, and complex history in California, the Western States and the US as a whole. The 'settlers'<sup>349</sup> of America believed (and still believe) in the notion of control, ownership and extraction of wealth from America's natural resources, including water.<sup>350</sup> Those native to the land believe in water as a continuous source of life. As such, Indigenous people are on the other side of a 'dichotomy of ideology', and their relationship to water has been restricted and contested throughout the genocidal history of the 'settling' of America, up to the present Dakota Access Pipeline challenge by Native Americans, and depressing contemporary statistics on access to clean water.<sup>351</sup> With

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<sup>346</sup> Ibid., p. 124-5.

<sup>347</sup> It is the belief of Hsu and Yazell that First Nation and Indigenous people are already suffering from current and historical apocalypse, and that climate emergencies are not only their future, but also their past and their present. Hsu and Yazell, p. 347, p. 349. Mathias Thaler writes, 'It is a truism to say that one person's utopia may be another's dystopia.' Mathias Thaler, 'Bleak dreams, not nightmares: Critical dystopias and the necessity of melancholic hope', *Constellations*, 26.4, (2019) 607-622 (p. 608).

<sup>348</sup> Hermann, p. 6; Additionally, as Walter puts it: 'Fictional accounts of the apocalypse can also work as reminders that what is presented as a feature of a future society is already an established fact of its extra-textual reality and already present in the form of accepted beliefs and ideologies'. p. 139.

<sup>349</sup> Quotation marks my own, since the term 'settlers' could erase the fact that America was already 'settled' before it became America.

<sup>350</sup> Naomi Klein, *On Fire: The Burning Case for a Green New Deal* (London: Allen Lane, 2019), p. 20.

<sup>351</sup> In the U.S., 12% of Native Americans have no access to clean water, dramatically contrasting with the 99% of Americans who do. Karletta Chief, 'Emerging Voices of Tribal Perspectives in Water Resources', *Journal of Contemporary Water Research & Education*, 163 (2018) pp. 1-5 (p.2); 'dichotomy of ideology': Susan M. Larned, 'Water is Life: The Native American Tribal Role in Protecting Natural Resources,' *Environmental and Earth Law Journal* 8.1 (2018) 52-94 (p. 58); 'continuous': Larned, p. 52; 'pipeline': Larned, p. 55; 'Mni Wiconi. Water is life.' Native American Rights Fund, 'In Honor of World Water Day (March 22)', 2018 <<https://www.narf.org/world-water-day/>> [accessed 24.05.2020].

regards to the pipeline, an attorney for the Standing Rock Sioux tribe has stated that: “It’s a continuation of a terrible history”.<sup>352</sup>

In interview Watkins has condemned the ‘rugged individualism’ and ‘Western exceptionalism’ that she believes proliferate in conversations about the California drought, as well as tracing the issues in her novel back to manifest destiny.<sup>353</sup> She critiques such figures as Brigham Young, Leland Stanford and William Mulholland (going as far as to call the West ‘Mulholland’s America’) as architects of an unsustainable California, built on greed.<sup>354</sup> With this combination of religious leaders, irresponsible engineers, colonizers, worked land, and the dangerously arrogant philosophy that encourages white supremacy, Watkins is attacking the history that gave birth to the ‘Anglo-Saxon West that tends to ignore Native peoples’.<sup>355</sup> The awesome power of the dune is its ability to do precisely what Singh Hayer says, to erase the familiar markers of a ‘civilisation’, ‘leaving a landscape that is implacable’.<sup>356</sup> Indeed, the pages read as an elegy to the things lost to the dune sea, ranging from ‘an iconic cohort of roadside fiberglass dinos’ to ‘The Calico Early Man site’.<sup>357</sup> Embedded within these lost things, are, of course, American history and stories, such as: ‘The Potosi mine, which made the lead that made the bullets that made such quantities of blood bloom in the Mountain Meadows massacre that Brigham Young was forced to revise his grand plan for Deseret’, and the opal taken from the Rainbow Ridge Opal mine that Leland Stanford ‘presented to his wife, Jane, as a push gift upon the birth of their only son’.<sup>358</sup> These two stories are

<sup>352</sup> Jan Hasselman in Kristen Holmes and Gregory Wallace, ‘Biden administration will not shut down Dakota Access Pipeline during environmental review, DOJ lawyer tells court’, *CNN Politics*, (9 April 2021) <<https://edition.cnn.com/2021/04/09/politics/dakota-access-pipeline-biden-administration/index.html>> [accessed 10.07.2021]

<sup>353</sup> In interview Watkins writes of this: ‘[in the novel] everybody’s looking back to Manifest Destiny to figure out, How did we get to the point where we don’t have any garlic growing in Gilroy anymore?’ and: ‘The way we talk about the California drought has like all the baggage of rugged individualism and Western exceptionalism all over it.’ Mcauley.

<sup>354</sup> Mulholland designed the Los Angeles Aqueduct, which enabled the city to take the shape it has today and was a trigger for ‘the Owens Valley War’, when the Owens Valley was drained to irrigate land that was owned by Mulholland’s friends and financial backers. PBS writes of his work: ‘the construction of hundreds of river dams across the West has [...] had an enormous environmental impact and given rise to massive concentrations of economic and political power.’ PBS, ‘New Perspectives on the West: William Mulholland (1855-1935)’ <<https://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/people/ir/mulholland.htm>> [accessed 14.02.2021]

Watkins actually comes from the Owens Valley, and this influenced the book. Alex Clark, ‘Interview, Claire Vaye Watkins: ‘How come nobody’s ever having sex in the apocalypse?’’, *The Guardian* (2016) <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jan/31/claire-vaye-watkins-gold-fame-citrus>> [accessed 12.02.2021].

<sup>355</sup> Brooke Gladstone, ‘The Desert Reasserts Itself’, *WNYC* (2017) <<https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/otm/segments/desert-reasserts-itself>> [accessed 14.02.2021].

<sup>356</sup> Civilisation in quotation marks, since a settler’s civilisation could be an Indigenous person’s apocalypse, see Nayuka Gorrie in Tyson Yunkaporta, ‘I’m part of the world’s oldest living culture, but could I kill a zombie with a boomerang?’ *The Guardian* (2017) <<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/sep/27/im-part-of-the-worlds-oldest-living-culture-but-could-i-kill-a-zombie-with-a-boomerang>> [accessed 14.02.2021]; Singh Hayer, p. 48.

<sup>357</sup> Watkins, p. 114-5.

<sup>358</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.



ones that involve people taking from the earth for their own purposes, without considering the cost, either to themselves or to the land. There are already warnings in these early appropriations that tally with older, Indigenous beliefs, such as ‘the fundamental Cherokee truth that you must give back when you take from the earth. You cannot take, take, take and not expect disaster to occur’.<sup>359</sup> Luz states ‘John Muir had written how when we try to pick out anything by itself we find it hitched to everything else in the universe’.<sup>360</sup> Demonstrating one of the most fundamental laws underpinning nature—that everything is linked and dependent—Watkins makes it transparent that this apocalypse is not a freak of luck or an accident, as would be a meteor strike or a volcano eruption. The drought and the Amargosa are only happening because of American settler attitudes towards land ownership and management, described by her as ‘genocidal, ecocidal land grab’.<sup>361</sup> Indeed, in her article on *Gold Fame Citrus*, Hicks writes that: ‘Watkins presents the Amargosa not just as the short-term product of a vapid and hyperconsuming contemporary California. Instead, it is the ultimate outcome of the historical conquest of North America.’<sup>362</sup> An ‘unbridled assertion of human dominance’ in the West is what has created this picture of the colonists’ apocalypse: the man-made beast eradicating the man-made.<sup>363</sup>

In each of the novels studied, there can be a sense of curiosity and even enjoyment in the uncanniness of the destructive sublime—a pleasure that ‘is unsettling and ambiguous’; disaster is subversive and chaotic and may create that ‘tug of iron in the blood’ that Watkins describes with the Amargosa.<sup>364</sup> There is something terrible but irresistible in the ‘sheer spectacle’ of seeing familiar cities flooded, of well-known watercourses run dry, of storied neighbourhoods burnt down.<sup>365</sup> The uncomfortable enjoyment of this requires some connection to these places, even

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<sup>359</sup> Elizabeth Ammons, *Brave New Words: How Literature Will Save the Planet* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010) p. 105. Indeed, Watkins writes in an article in *The New York Review*: ‘This region’s amnesiac narrative has long erased its native people and with them any wisdom we might have gleaned from the land’s long memory’. ‘The Burning West’, *The New York Review* (2020) <<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2020/11/05/the-burning-west/>>[accessed 28.05.2021].

<sup>360</sup> Watkins, p. 84.

<sup>361</sup> Watkins, ‘The Burning West’.

<sup>362</sup> Hicks (2018), p. 641.

<sup>363</sup> Theodore Roszak, *Person/Planet: The Creative Disintegration of Industrial Society* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1978) p. 22.

<sup>364</sup> Orvell, p. 647.

<sup>365</sup> Anderson mentions the ‘sheer spectacle that go[es] hand in hand with seeing infrastructure and culture destroyed.’ p. 270; Such as London in *The End We Start From*; LA in *Parable of the Sower*, the Venice canals in *Gold Fame Citrus*; Anderson writes: ‘some examples [of twentieth- and twenty-first-century apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic films] now omit or downplay the possibility of renewal and instead revel in the destruction itself.’ p. 267.

(and especially) if only imaginary.<sup>366</sup> However, they also need enough distance from them to feel secure that they aren't watching their own home burning down. Within *Wire Diamonds*, I was inspired by the idea of 'iconic locales destroyed or transformed into colossal memento mori'.<sup>367</sup> In the narrators' world, the huge power-station towers are their 'iconic locale'; serving as their symbol for home since they are situated just down the coast from the garrison.<sup>368</sup> However, Ash's reaction to the explosion is muted. He says:

With the first explosion you think the noise is coming from the coach engines, it's that kind of machine sound, a jet splitting in mid-air, a tank moving over rubble. Then the air turning grey behind the garrison, and that's your home, there, whipping your head round to look at it. The second explosion, now you're watching the right place, sounding just that split second after a square kilometre of the eastern seaboard hits the sky. Worse than before, bigger, taking the glass from the windows of the hotels and bits of billboards raining on the coach windscreen.<sup>369</sup>

There is a 'perturbing of the familiar' here, inasmuch as the earth suddenly meets the sky. But Ash's present-tense narration—seeing this immediately—is still descriptive and does not disintegrate on seeing his home destroyed. This is because, even though he says that it's his home, he remains an interloper of sorts. His family do not own the home. If destroyed, it would be sad, but they would not be homeless. They would not have lost property, livelihood, ancestral links, an agrarian relationship with the land, sacred sites, loved ones, security, or imagined futures, as they would have done had they been islanders proper. There is the cinematic sense of drama without loss, and this reserve continues into his later narration when he sees Stephen arrive at the Mess: 'He'll tell you the garrison's over and you're leaving island tonight. Or you're moving down this end, or whatever else, it doesn't matter to you now'.<sup>370</sup> However terrible the explosion might have been, for Ash, this is something that he is able to shrug off with equanimity because of his positioning on the island. This attitude is also reflected in Jakey's narration (as mentioned in Chapter 3 above) which sees them driving through the 'wilderness' whilst listening to Stevie Nicks. The fact that he is able to call the burnt land 'wilderness' reduces it to empty space, 'terra nullius', and dismisses its reality as the deeply important home of other humans, animals and plant-life.

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<sup>366</sup> L. Buell, p. 72-3.

<sup>367</sup> Singh Hayer, p. 48.

<sup>368</sup> Jesamy writes: 'Those four candy-striped chimneys were our strange beacon of home, visible from the town and most of the hills behind it; as long as we could see those giant peppermint canes, we'd be ok.' Thomas, p. 9.

<sup>369</sup> Thomas, p. 145.

<sup>370</sup> *Ibid*, p.175.

The siblings' privilege is that they can experience a disaster—to the extent of having to be evacuated—and yet actually embrace the chaos of an upturned world and selfishly find it comforting, even whilst others have died and unimaginable destruction has been done to the island. I wanted to continue this kind of attitude into the scene when the narrators make it back onto the garrison and encounter the glass from the explosion's shockwave all over the ground:

Going through the empty school buildings we crunched over a carpet of glass in our flipflops. We looked for slabs to stand on to feel that pop as it cracked underneath us, like thick ice on a puddle.<sup>371</sup>

I found some parallels between this and a scene where Ray, Luz and Ig are driving through the parched landscape, everything dead and droughted around them. They come upon a rare forest of yucca in the moonlight, Ig's first forest, and 'she, irreverent devil that she was, recognized they were traipsing through something sacred'.<sup>372</sup> But even as Ray touches a frond, the tree tears with a sound like 'a very delicate fabric', and collapses dusty and papery in front of them. There is the realisation that 'this was no forest but a cemetery'.<sup>373</sup> To mark the solemnity of this sight, they begin to destroy the tree corpses, shot-putting them, kicking through them, crushing and trampling a path through them. The baby laughs until they stop. In the face of so much destruction they can only contribute.

In both these scenes the characters come face to face with destruction and enjoy the sensory experience of playing with the litter of disaster. However, the primary difference between the two scenes is that, in *Gold Fame Citrus*, the trees are finished; they are dead and probably also extinct. There is no way of bringing them back because the cataclysmic drought that killed them has already happened. What Ray and Luz are doing with the dead trees in the forest graveyard is hurting nothing apart from themselves, whereas Ash Jesamy and Jakey popping the glass under their flipflops is not an empty act. They are wandering around in the shattered glass of a disaster scene but, because the various disasters of the island never quite coalesce into full apocalypse, the people of the island are trapped in the exhausting cycle of trying to repair each rift before the next one occurs. Only a short time ago, Jesamy was ashamed of the fact that the clean-up was the

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<sup>371</sup> Thomas, p. 175

<sup>372</sup> Watkins, p. 86-7.

<sup>373</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

responsibility of hired local staff, but, out of sight of them, they have no qualms about increasing their work-load by shattering the glass even further. This is indicative of the fact that they do not consider these disasters to necessarily be a part of them or their narrative. Again, they are much more like dark tourists, being able to be there whilst not being there in the same way that others are.

## 7. Conclusion

Throughout this critical reflection I have argued that *Wire Diamonds* is heavily influenced by certain apocalyptic tropes, and more generally an apocalyptic aesthetic. Via the garrison, with its insistence on bordered and militarised land, *Wire Diamonds* engages, however indirectly, with the idea of privilege inherent in creating and defending a Lifeboat with carefully selected citizens. The idea of islands, both physical and imaginary are also important literary devices, and were borrowed directly from the multiple islands within the constellation of novels studied. Additionally, the images of abandonment, wreckage, destruction and renascent wilderness also serve important purposes in describing an island torn by multiple schisms.

However, the novel ultimately evades fully inhabiting the genre by various mechanisms, not least the ending. The novel ends with a resolution of sorts with regards to the narrators' mental well-being: an end to a situation of domestic abuse; a refutation of homophobia and misogyny; an escape from potential incest; a return to a lost family unit. *Wire Diamonds* deliberately does not reveal the meaning, progression, resolution, or underpinning intent (or lack thereof) of the island's multiple disasters. The 'hangman' is not revealed as either a catalyst for the novel's action or just a coincidental and symbolic event in a string of such coincidences. Had I plotted the novel to engage more fully with these elements, and involved the narrators more deeply in the island's problems, then the book might have veered into more apocalyptic territory. However, the narrators remained relatively untouched by the events unfolding around them; they lacked the agency of YA teenage characters, rather embodying a vulnerability and passivity which I felt to be more of a realist characterisation, especially for teenagers within such a hierarchical milieu as a military garrison. Lacking the impetus and curiosity to be able to do anything about the disasters of the island, they instead serve to symbolically increase the pressure on the narrators and their coming-of-age

interpersonal dramas. Most importantly, when the siblings leave the island the apocalypse immediately ceases for them as it is contained discretely on the island and does not follow them to the archipelago. It was through this dance between engagement and evasion with apocalyptic tropes I wanted to demonstrate that apocalypse is very much an issue of perspective.

I thought it important in concluding this reflection to consider the chronology of this project, and how the two constituent parts—creative and critical—worked together. By the time I began to work on this critical reflection, *Wire Diamonds* was, in large part, already drafted. I struggled to write critically and creatively in tandem, and did not want an engagement with scholarly texts or theories to direct or sway the ultimate direction of the book, especially because I did not set out to explicitly write an apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic novel. However, the critical reflection did allow me to formally acknowledge a genre and group of writers which had been enormously influential throughout my life as both a reader and a writer.<sup>374</sup> The links and connections between my work and apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic writing were already there, running in subterranean seams beneath the surface of the writing. This reflection helped me to excavate and bring some of these out to the light, and actually became enormously supportive when thinking through some elements of this novel which worried me, especially the selfishness, interiority or brutality of my narrators. When writing short stories, I tend to write characters that range from being unreliable to outright monstrous. However, spending such an extended amount of time with narrators of moral ambiguity felt different. Using the lens of apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic fiction through which to view these narrators as a product of their upbringing and their immersion in a milieu defined by colonialism and military ideals certainly helped me to reconcile some ethical issues I had with them.<sup>375</sup> The research and thought that I invested in this critical piece also provided another unexpected benefit to my overall development as a writer, and that was to inform my second novel-length project which features a substantial section written from the perspective of a character struggling

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<sup>374</sup> This group of writers was, of course, far larger than the final group that became the 'constellation'; it included Nnedi Okorafor, Margaret Atwood, Naomi Alderman, Louise Erdrich, Angela Carter, Maja Lunde, Sara Taylor, and Karen Thompson Walker.

<sup>375</sup> This especially goes for Jesamy's character development. Strangely, I felt freer to write acts of violence into Ash's narration, but felt that in making Jesamy vengeful, savage or unlikeable I was being a 'bad feminist' or doing women a disservice. Understanding her from the perspective of someone who is brought up in a system that doesn't grant her any power other than that of her sexuality helped me understand that her brutality is born of a complex vulnerability.

through a blasted post-apocalyptic landscape. So, in a sense, this critical reflection is the vital intellectual scaffolding between the gulf of finishing my first book and writing the second.

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