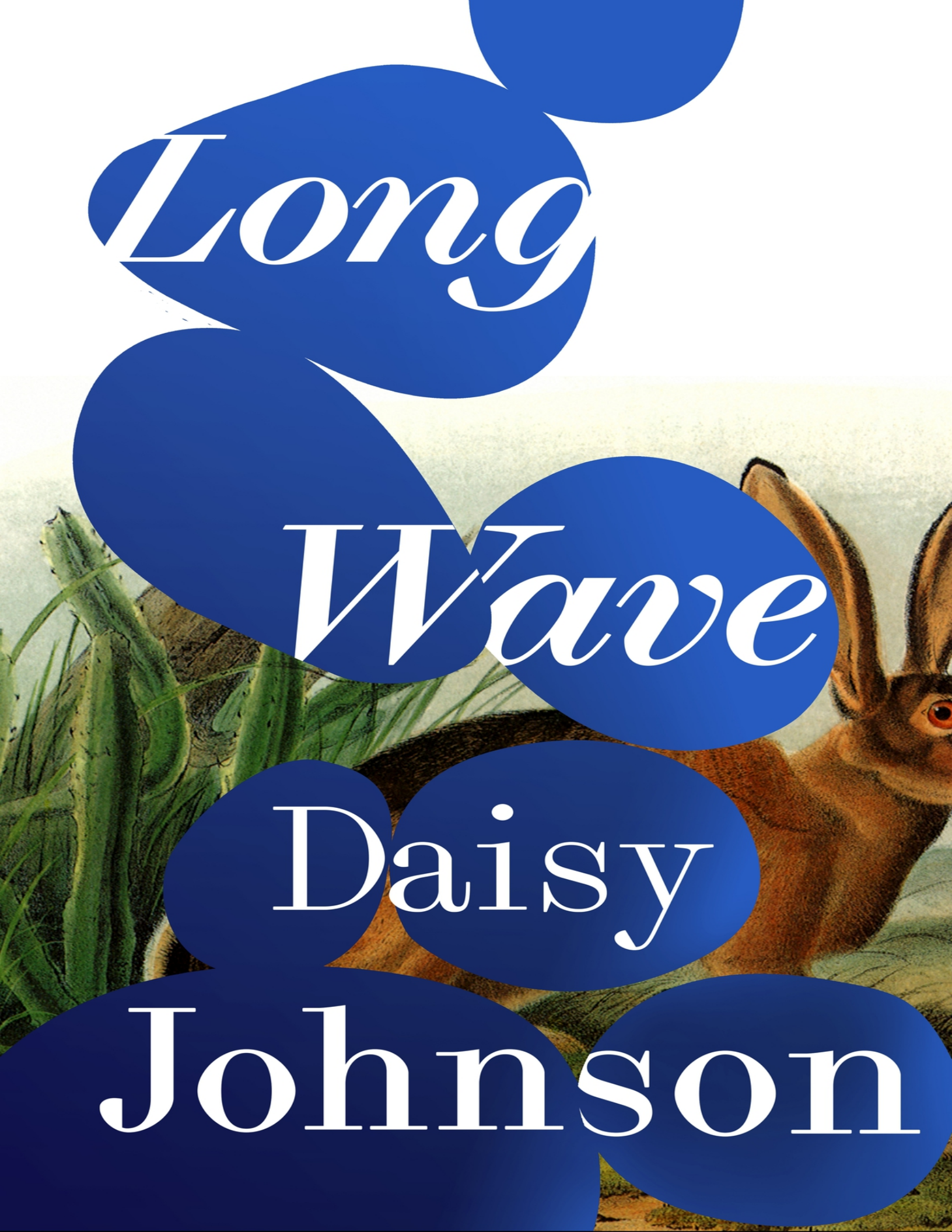


A brown rabbit is depicted in a field of green grass. The rabbit is facing right, with its long ears perked up. The background is a light blue sky. The text is overlaid on the image in white, with each word in a separate blue oval.

Long

Wave

Daisy

Johnson

VINTAGE

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About the Author

Daisy Johnson was born in 1990. Her debut short-story collection, *Fen*, was published in 2016. In 2018 she became the youngest author ever to be shortlisted for the Booker Prize with her debut novel, *Everything Under*. Her 2020 novel *Sisters* was adapted into the 2024 feature film *September Says*. She is the winner of the Harper's Bazaar Short Story Prize, A. M. Heath Prize and the Edge Hill Short Story Prize. Her first play, *Viola's Room*, was produced in 2024 by the immersive theatre company Punchdrunk. She lives in Oxford by the river.

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Also by Daisy Johnson

Fen

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Part One

THE ISLAND

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Edith

The dog is grief-stricken at the boxes in the hallway. She herself – Edith, mother of long-gone Ruth, widow of newly deceased Patrick – finds her sorrow to be nocturnal. At night she cannot sleep. She prowls the rooms and everywhere there are the markings of motherhood, the markings of child-rearing, the markings of child loss. In the day she is matter-of-fact and busy. The house belongs to the church, and with Patrick gone she must go also. There is a new vicar, one whose sermons she does not care to hear. She does not even go on Sundays, the breaking of a lifelong routine. On Sundays she walks the dog, drinks a cup of coffee on the back step and waits for the boy she has employed to help her clear out the house. She can see him out of the kitchen window, now, halfway up the ladder, cutting down the tree. The cherry tree which the neighbour's child once fell out of, breaking his arm. The tree has been dead for so long but inside, where the chainsaw incises, it is bright, almost lurid green.

She is packing up the house. Except every day there is less she wants to keep. Sometimes at night, the flash of her own white nightie ghost in the bare windows, she takes out all the things she has put in the boxes and places them back in the cupboards. In the day she understands there is lunacy in this, and promises she will not do it again; but she is a different person in the dark. If she puts the things into the boxes she will have to take them to the new house. Patrick's fingerprint-stained reading glasses, his waterproof coat and soft winter hat with the hole, the sudoku he cut out from the newspaper; these are the things she can neither take with her nor get rid of. More than this is Ruth's room and everything inside which does not belong to Ruth – because a person surely cannot own an object thirty years after they last touched it – but which also cannot belong to Edith.

In the violent night just after Patrick died, she heaved the toolbox out from under the stairs and carried it up. The house was purple and tender

with waiting but there was no waiting, not any longer. She took the screwdriver from the toolbox and dismantled the locks and bolts on the door of the room where Ruth had slept, hacking at them. She berated herself sharply for not having done this before – why, why? The truth was there was always the possibility that Ruth would return and Edith could, once more, close the door and lock it, keeping her there, this time, forever.

Patrick has been dead, now, for two weeks. She is on her knees in the sitting room. The books on the alcove shelves have given her such trouble and she keeps starting the job and then despairing and having to go do something else. The tree in the garden is being cut down because it has not been safe for years. The house is being given to the new vicar and his family. She must sort out her dead husband's books. These tall, deep shelves are where Patrick kept his atlases, his dictionaries of English and French, the various Bibles and the big volumes of encyclopaedias which she has never, not once, opened and which she so rarely remembers him opening. Perhaps with Ruth he did. They always had their exchanges and games that she was outside of. He taught Ruth how to ride a bike, running after her around and around the churchyard. She jerks the first of the large books out fast enough that it falls onto her leg, painful. She gets the others out and stacks them up in a pile. She opens the front door and lifts as many as she can, some fall to the ground. She takes her armful to the car boot and then returns. On the doormat one of the hefty encyclopaedias has fallen awkwardly and flipped open. She bends down to retrieve it and as she does sees that the page it has opened to is disformed, the top edge taken and folded down dramatically, one corner to the opposite side. She clicks her tongue at the sight of it. It has been folded long enough that the bend in the paper stays when she presses it back, the page curling inwards. It was Ruth, of course, who did it. Ruth is the only person who would do such a thing, not out of interest but out of malice towards her mother, who despises folded pages. The sight of it makes her mouth hurt. She unfolds it once more, holding it in place, and sees the page between her splayed fingers. It is one of the pages for *I* and when she looks down the arrow that the fold makes, she sees the word *ISLAND*. Her face goes cold and her hands shake as she looks at it.

Edith does not know it but the fold bisecting the page, creating a sharp straight edge, resembles the river as it leaves the town and cuts up through

the paper of the country until it reaches the end of the land and opens itself up into sea and sea and there, as with the word: an ISLAND.

Edith takes the page between her hands and tears along the fold and then tears again and again until the pieces are so small she cannot hold them and they fall from her hands.

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Ruth

There is the house in the town where Ruth grew up and ran away from. There is the door with the lock and the garden with the tree and the school car park in the darkness. There is the river hurrying out of the town and passing through the country and to the sea. There is Ruth when she was a child and the dream of the island moved up the walls of her room and became almost all she could see. There is, now, Ruth – a decade gone from the house in the town – on the island, finally. There is the island. Here it is. Magnificent and terrifying, divine. It was made so long ago, it was battered by ice from the rock. Here and there, in the craggy cliff, the ground opens up, smaller and larger entrances leading to caves and tunnels below, the gush and bellow of the sea moving in and out. At the highest point, a white exclamation mark: a lighthouse.

Ruth leaves her daughter at the lighthouse and walks out to the cliff. At some point she stops and looks back to see if she can make out the clearing where Ori waits, but already it is out of sight. She keeps going. She sees birds with white-tipped arrow wings, seals slipping into the water. She sees beaches protected from the wind. She must go back now. She must. OK, she says, here I come.

She turns and starts walking back to Ori. The ground is treacherous. The island spins around her, fills her; she keeps walking. As she walks she gives away some of the island – it belongs only to her, beloved, the clear and ringing dream of it that she has had since she was a child in that house by the river – and she thinks: I am walking to Ori. I am walking back to Ori. They will return to the caravan now, to JP and Nora and Leo. She walks fast. She will take her daughter back to real life now and save them both from the tangles of this swooping dream. She walks, thinking of the words

she will say to Ori. I love you, I will always love you. The ground ahead is

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Ori

Along the paper fold of the country, there is an island. The cliff winds are hard and wild but the derelict, long-abandoned lighthouse is in a clearing surrounded by scrubby trees. The doorway inside is a mouth, the concrete floor inside is cracked open, weed-covered.

In the clearing Ori waits for her mother to come back. The stones she has found here are so, so beautiful. Grey with darker bands, others mottled and rough, a few with holes bored right through them. She strokes them against her cheeks, puts them in her mouth, fills her pockets. She is six years old and wearing red dungarees and torn bee wings, she is singing songs without words into the tickling wind, she is waiting for her mother to come back to her. They will go home, they will eat Chinese takeaway, they will tell the others about their trip, the island will be a story again. This is what will happen.

It begins to get dark. She crawls into the sleeping bag and pulls it shut over her head. When she hears her mother coming, she will wait and wait and then she will leap out. SURPRISE!

When she wakes her mother has still not returned. Ori is wrapped in the sleeping bag, underneath the sky. She gets on all fours and looks around. She needs a wee. She needs something to drink. She is hungry. She stands and shouts her mother's name. She shouts and shouts and shouts until her throat is sore. She retreats inside the lighthouse. She wets herself, as she has not done for a long time, and it is warm until it cools uncomfortably. She calls for Ruth. She calls her by every name she has ever called her by. She gets out of the sleeping bag and drinks water from the little spring with her hands. She gets a Babybel from the bag and eats it.

She dozes in the doorway of the lighthouse. When she wakes there is a ghost dancing. It is a hare. She screams for Ruth and the hare does not run but freezes, flattened on its belly, waiting.

Night, and a dark so impenetrable she cannot even see the tree two paces in front of her. She pulls the sleeping bag over her head.

A storm comes. Rain first and then thunder, getting closer. She is afraid and hides inside the lighthouse. The storm is directly overhead. Momentous clashes of sound, the rain spattering through holes in the ceiling, the lightning illuminating the jaggedy branches of the trees.

When she wakes, she understands immediately her mistake. The storm has blown itself out and the sky is white and gentle. She fumbles out of the sleeping bag, kicking it aside. She takes out two smooth stones from her pocket and holds them in her hands. There is the smell, still, of the burnt brambles, the charred walls. She holds one stone in each hand and knocks and knocks them together. Surely the sound must travel across the whole island. And yes, there, someone is coming into the clearing. Her mother is coming through the trees towards her.

She thinks that the sky is filling with pieces of cut paper, like snow; although it is not. White particles turn into flakes turn into sheets until everything is blank.

Min

It is March, the spring equinox. The man named Min is on the island to look for hares. He has pitched his tent in the island lowlands. There are traces of the hares everywhere, although for two days he does not see them. The distinctive, long footprints run circles around him; on the rock he finds their droppings and in the grass signs of abandoned forms. A few times, carried on the wind, he thinks he hears their warning thumps, although he cannot be certain. An enclosed environment like the island could be the perfect place for his experiment. He finds himself easily tired, out of breath even after a small walk or climb. He thinks that he must dream in the tent. He is studying the dreams of hares and surely he must also dream.

He travels slowly around the island. The hares here are of the mountain variety and not native to the coast. He can see the destruction and mutation that has been caused by their proliferation. The saplings are cut off near to the ground and the bark on the trees stripped right back. The hares have decimated a lot of the plant life and in turn that has changed the bird population. There are historical reports of shearwaters on the island, of at least three kinds of petrels that came here to breed; they are gone now.

He stakes out, lies in wait. He sees cormorants diving for fish on the scummy waves. He eats his sandwiches wrapped in foil, sheltering from the bone-biting wind. It is getting late. If he doesn't return to the tent now, he will be stumbling around on the cliff. Beginning to gather his things, he looks up. At the apex of the rise above him he sees movement. He does not immediately recognise the creature for what it is. It is stretched upwards from the ground. Something in its stance, and he finds himself waiting for it to speak, to call out to him. It is a thin ghost, risen from the earth. The wind smacks him a blow and he focuses. It is a hare. If it dropped to its belly, it would be hidden, but it is stood upright, ears splayed, chin tipped to the sky, enormous eyes widened, split lip. He takes a photograph of it. The sound of

the shutter is an explosion. The hare sees him, flees. No one in that land runs as fast. He marks the position on his map. He longs to stay or to follow it – hares were once considered messengers, guides – but soon it will be hard to see and if he falls no one will ever find him, so he leaves.

Over the next two days he sees the same hare again often. It is a jill, quite young but already big and very strong. He sees her fighting a buck, tearing its ears so that blood rains on the ground. He sees her visiting her babies, feeding them and then leaving to lure away predators. He knows that she sees him. Sometimes she rises up the way she did that first day, boxes the air.

During his time at the university he came across descriptions of experiments which observed the brains of rats as they moved around a maze, noting the neurons in the hippocampus related to place which became active as they went. When the rats were sleeping the same neurons were found to fire up, in such a particular pattern that the rats could be tracked moving, in their dreams, through the maze. He wanted to repeat the experiment with hares but there were difficulties specific to the genus. Hares were almost impossible to domesticate; the experiment would need to take place in the wild. They were flighty, difficult to catch and sedate, sensitive to change. He looks at the hare and tries to imagine the harness he would need to design for her to wear, lightweight, almost unnoticeable.

He lies in the tent and listens to the whoop of the wind loosening and then pulling taut the plastic. He stays in the tent for two days, sleeping and sleeping. When he rouses himself, finally, the wind has lessened. He trudges out. The hares are dancing and then running. It is the reason he first loved them, for their speed. When he was a boy he imagined he could one day run that fast. The sky is white. He glimpses the mother hare racing. She streaks up the rock and he follows her. The cliff is a wreckage of holes leading to the caves beneath. There is a crevice that widens out into a maw, the sound of the whooshing sea coming up from beneath. He glimpses a tattered flash of yellow caught around a sharp spear of rock.

He follows the hare. Ahead there is a thicket of wind-beaten trees. He crosses the threshold of the clearing. There is a plastic sheet flapping on the ground and a scattering of pots and pans, the burn mark of a fire on the rock, a stack of wood heaped up unevenly. In the doorway of the lighthouse is the hare, risen up, belly revealed. He hesitates. The hare seems to

crumple, dropping forward. He goes quickly towards it. Up close it is not a hare at all but a child in a white hat too big for her and bare, nearly blue arms. Her hands are closed tightly. He takes off his coat and wraps her in it, picks her up. As her hands loosen, a clutch of stones falls out. He bends, scoops them up. They are hardly warm at all from her skin. He puts them in his pocket. She weighs very little, like an armful of snow. He turns away and begins to run back to the beach.

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Part Two

THE WOMAN IN THE WATER

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Ruth

In the house owned by the church, in the town where Ruth grows up, it is summer. It is the summer that Ruth – who will one day walk back across the island to Ori – and the shy boy next door, Dylan, turn ten. Wavering heat across the parked cars. The smell of dewy grass beginning to crisp, the acrid smoke of the cigarettes Dylan's three brothers share on the path. Every day Ruth and Dylan drag their bikes through the side alley between the houses and ride the long loop of the street down to the main road. There are dirtied playing cards fixed to the spokes of their bikes, rattling in the breeze. The cards rattle kerching kerching and the blackbirds nesting among the chimney stacks chuck to one another.

The fence between the two gardens is taken down. Trestle tables are carried from the church, the legs clicked into place. Ruth's mother cleans the barbecue, scraping the rack with a metal sponge, and, in the kitchen, lines up pink sausages and pulpy burgers on a metal tray, empties packets of orange crisps into bowls, finishes icing the cake with pink frosting.

Singing crickets in the grass, the lurid orange dust from the cheesy crisp balls, the ice tapping in the large jug, the ping of elastic on party hats. The dog, Kitty, tied up to the fence. One of Dylan's brothers, Marvin, has a girlfriend who wants to do an art foundation and she sets up a face-painting table. There are two cakes, chunks of chopped carrot, little sticks of cheese and pineapple. Dylan's mother brings a wooden pen from the shop where she works and fills it with rabbits and guinea pigs, a tortoise that bites. The face paint is second-hand, cakey and dusty, none of the animal faces quite look the way they are supposed to, smudges of colour: Komodo dragons, red admiral butterflies, Bengal tigers, starfish. Marvin's girlfriend paints Ruth as a peacock, bright blue and purple, eyes on her lids, but Dylan is out of sorts and crosses his arms over his trembling ribs, refuses. They play

pass the parcel, a present on every go, and cut the chocolate bar wearing gloves and bobbing for apples in Ruth's mother's enormous jam pan. Ruth feels sugar-hysterical, on the edge of weeping, her hands sticky with frosting and barely diluted squash.

She and Dylan slink away, lie on their backs behind the tree. Dylan is chatting and chatting, kicking his legs up into the air.

Yeah, she says, though she isn't really listening.

You aren't listening, he says.

I am.

What did I say?

Like, I don't know, something about something.

No. Just listen. Marvin says he's taking us all away for my birthday. Not Mum, just us.

Away? Where?

I dunno. To this island, I think. Marvin's just passed his driving test so we're celebrating. We're camping.

An island?

Yeah. You have to take a boat to get there. It's called, um, I think, Bear Island.

She sits up.

Maybe I could come? she says.

Yeah, that's what I was saying.

Yeah?

It would be so fun.

Yeah, she says, although even as she speaks, she can see her mother's face, the whites of her eyes, her voice: *An island? How ridiculous, you're only ten. They run wild, those boys.*

Come on, she says.

They go back and join the other children, cluster around the pen of animals, reaching in to coo and stroke the soft, pulsing sides of the guinea pigs who try to hide beneath bundles of hay, the long white ears of the rabbit. The children huddle together. Their bare arms goosebump. They press their cheeks against Ruth's, their breath hot, their skin sticky. A couple of them thread their fingers through Dylan's hands and hold on to him, his eyes wide, his mouth ajar. They rush giggling, clinging to one another, slipping on the wet grass, to the bottom of the garden and link arms around the tree. Look, Ruth says, and she reaches and clambers up, swinging in

wild brave loops from branch to branch, climbing much higher than she would normally do, before turning and shimmying back down. Brilliant, one girl murmurs, and another kisses her on the cheek and one says, look, and when she turns her head she sees Dylan already halfway up the trunk. He rarely climbs the tree, won't do it when she tries to make him; but now he is moving quickly, faster than she went, hands barely skimming the bark before moving on. When she looks back at the table by the house the parents aren't watching them at all, and she knows they are alone. Dylan is already approaching the thinner branches at the top, the children's heads turned up, and she sees the moment that he loses confidence or perhaps faith and begins to fall, a hand reaching where there is nothing to reach, and the children around her let out a small ahh of fear or maybe only anticipation and Dylan is falling then, backwards, falling for barely less time than an inhale and approaching the sun-hardened ground. She senses around her something that might be time, going forward and going back, link to link to link, and she remembers Dylan held by his brother that first night she became aware of him, held so tightly and lovingly in the black as he cried, and Dylan lies crying, on the ground.

The ambulance throws its blue lights across the faces of the houses. Dylan is white-faced and silent. Kitty is barking and barking, trying to get free. When Ruth edges close enough, she can see the bone that has exited Dylan's arm through the skin. The brothers are smoking on the step. When she looks at them, Marvin, the oldest, bares his teeth in a grin. Her mother is at the table quietly tidying away bowls and plates. Ruth's father is bent at Dylan's head, touching him on the hair lightly, speaking to him. When Ruth looks at the tree she sees the sharp edge of the broken branch where Dylan fell. The ambulance drivers come slowly down through the garden and load Dylan onto a stretcher and take him back to the road. The parents start gathering their children together and ushering them away. Ruth cannot bear the day's progression to its end. She goes behind the tree and crouches in the quiet, hiding from her mother, and then climbs up onto a pile of plant pots, heaves herself over the fence and drops down into the culvert behind, the way she and Dylan often do. The culvert is a narrow concrete alley with an open channel running along the centre, below street level, lined with wire, haunted by neighbourhood cats. She walks along it, kicking at the clogs of leaves and branches, thinking about the bone coming out of

Dylan's arm. In the heat the water in the trench is low and slow, clogged with plastic bags and sodden newspaper. Above her head, on one side, run the backs of the gardens on her street, and she can hear the naw naw naw of late lawnmowers, the stutter of arguments. Ahead, the trees hang down heavy and green. She pushes her way through. The sides of the culvert shrink and reveal the overgrown land where the blackberry bushes have taken over and a couple of muntjac deer live secretly among the trees. The concrete entrance opens out, the water of the culvert joining that of the river. She climbs onto the bank. The river here – named the Dash – is a twisting, winding thing that ebbs and flows with the seasons, changing colour from green to brown, picking up speed and density in the rain, turning slow in the heat. It goes through the city and emerges grubbier, heavy with new load, and goes on. It crosses through towns and villages, cuts through hills and passes beneath grimy churning motorways; it shifts into cuts and oxbows and passes through that dark earthed land, the fens. On it goes and it reaches the sea, widens, opens out, is swallowed and swallows in return; and there, Ruth imagines, is where the island must be, the island where she might go with Dylan and his brothers. If she got into the river now and swam, she would, in days and days, come upon it. She wants to go. On the island no one could find her.

On either side of the river there are fields and little stony beaches, places that the older kids go to hang out and drink. She wonders if they are there now and if she could find them. She cannot go home yet. She crosses a field and down towards the place where a tributary of the river reverses upon itself, narrowing. The meadow is high. A brace of nettles leaves itchy spots on her calves that she scratches hard with her blunted, dirty nails. There are the remains of a campfire, the ground scorched. She lies on her back on the thick grass. Insects crawl up the stalks around her. A noise and then a heron crosses the sky above her head, ragged bent wings, neat legs. She sits up and a motion catches her eye further down the river. There is someone in the water. Ruth stands up to see better. The person is already in up to their knees. She follows the curve of the riverbank towards them. From the top of the wooden stile, she can see that it is a woman, moving forward quite steadily now, beneath an overhang of willows. There is something on her front that Ruth identifies slowly as a baby in a sling. She gets down off the stile and makes it to the part of the river where the willows grow. The woman is ahead of her in the water, not looking back. She is wearing her

coat even on this, the warmest day of the last five years. There is no beach here to enter the river, only a messy grassy bank that Ruth, without thinking, ploughs off from, dropping into the river, which is surprisingly, chillingly cold; splashing up into her mouth so that she tastes mud, iron.

When she raises her head, the woman is gone. Ruth splashes forward, takes a breath, goes under. There is a chug of kicked-up silt, her own white hands like darting fish, the bubbles streaming from her and up to the surface. She crashes out for air, goes back down. She cannot find the woman. She resurfaces, breathes, returns, repeats. She gives up and tries for the bank and cannot get out, her fingers slipping on the mud. Further down the river she scrambles up the stony inlet and onto the field. Her clothes are so heavy she can barely run. She tugs the dress over her head, for speed, and goes on in her underwear. She gets to the road and starts to shout. A car nearly strikes her but does not stop. The next one brakes hard and she thumps with both hands on the bonnet. She recognises the woman who gets out, a teacher from the school. Ruth is shouting and shouting and the woman is trying to touch her, put her jumper around her. She doesn't understand. No. The river. The river.

Ruth's mother comes at a run to the top of the bridge with a coat and a towel. She tries to get Ruth to go home but Ruth shrieks and won't leave, so they stay. Someone fetches her father from the church where he went late and he arrives and opens his arms but cannot seem to touch her. The three of them stand together. The police cars block the bridge and the divers are in the river. She watches them congregating on the banks – alien creatures with their oxygen tanks, their blind eyes – and then going back in again.

We need to go, her mother says, and each time she is more forceful until Ruth, sagging with tiredness, cannot withstand her and is led home. Dawn is coming. The ambulance has been waiting at the foot of the bridge for hours.

The flies gather and buzz at her window and the fan moves the heavy air back and forth. Her mother brings her chicken soup like she does when Ruth is sick, Coca-Cola left out until it flattens. Her mother is dressed for church. She goes at Ruth's hair with the paddle brush, tugging out the knots, rubs Ruth's hands with her own moisturiser from the little glass pot.

Mama, Ruth says. Her mouth is dry from the heat and from sleeping all morning. Did they find her?

She thinks of the divers sludging beneath the surface of the river, bringing up the woman and the baby in their enclosing arms, heaving them onto the bank. She both wants and does not want her mother to say it out loud, to say that she saw them, that she went back in the dewy dawn and saw as they brought them up, the way that the magnet fisherman brings up ancient bikes, rusted trampolines. Her mother takes her hand, lets in a little sip of air between her lips, lowers her eyelids carefully.

Listen. You must have imagined it. A trick of the brain. What were you doing out there? You must have been tired. A flying bird maybe, or a shadow on the water.

No, I saw them, I saw them.

The police came to the house this morning. They didn't find anyone. They looked all night. What were you even doing out there? You snuck out of the house? You didn't tell us where you were going. Did you go wild from seeing Dylan fall from the tree? Did you lose your mind?

The woman –

Stop it. There was no woman.

After her mother leaves, she sits in the window. There are children in the street, riding their bikes, playing football against the low walls. Even Dylan is there, out of hospital with his arm in a cast, drawing with fat pastel chalks on the pavement. When he sees her, he waves so enthusiastically with his good arm that his whole torso wags. She hears him an hour later, so brave, his high bright voice, asking for her to come out. She edges the bedroom door open and lies on her belly on the hallway floor, listening.

Not right now sweetheart, she's very tired, her mother says. Dylan starting to say something else but already the door is clicking closed.

She goes back to her room before her mother can find her there. Dylan is staring up at her window again. She wedges her fingernails underneath the frame and heaves it upwards, swings her leg out, braces her foot against the drainpipe. A couple of Dylan's brothers have appeared on the street. Marvin is there with his arm slung around his girlfriend's shoulders. She can smell the stink of the river. She gets her second leg round and then throws herself forward and half shimmies, half falls, down the drainpipe, landing in the flower bed. The brothers let out a muffled hurrah, their hands clamped over

their mouths. Dylan is already running off down the road, leading the way. Ruth gets herself up and races after him. When she looks back her mother is in the window, leaning out.

She and Dylan drop in the meadow grass, lie panting.

What happened? Dylan says when he's stopped wheezing. Why are you locked in?

In the river, I saw a woman in the river, with her baby.

She's gone mad, someone says. When she looks up Dylan's brothers have followed them and are standing in a loose circle, drinking bottles of Fanta.

Neil shrugs. Mum says you had a mental break, or something, had a hallucination.

No, Ruth says. I saw her.

Who was she? Dylan says.

I don't know.

The police are always lying to us, I saw it on TV, Stevie says, and Marvin grunts.

We should go look for her, Dylan says.

That's mad talk, Marvin says, but when they get up and go towards the other side of the field, he follows them. They traipse up and down the riverbank, looking for signs in the hardened mud, on the shingly beaches, among the reeds and nettles. Dylan finds a shoe, which they pass between them, peeling back the tongue to look inside, but it is decided it belongs to a man and is thrown back.

Shit, Neil says, and when Ruth turns her father is coming through the swishing grass towards them. He holds out his hand to her. She waves goodbye to the others. They walk home in silence. At the house her mother is waiting in the doorway, her forehead damp with sweat, her feet twisted inwards in her slippers. She rushes towards them and catches Ruth under her armpits, heaves her forward. Ruth feels herself go limp, the power draining from her, as if she were sick after all and could not walk. On the bed her mother tucks her beneath the sweltering duvet.

I'll carry up the telly, she says. There's some good detective shows on at this time of the day.

At nearly dinnertime she tries to go downstairs and her mother waylays her halfway and takes her by the elbow, leads her back.

I'm hot, Ruth says. Can I go into the garden?

You need to sleep. I'll bring your food up, a treat, in bed. The garden is all dried and brown.

It is late now but she cannot sleep. She rolls around the bed, trying to get comfy. Her elbow knocks the wall, and when she twitches the other way in pain her shoulder does the same thing. From through the wall there is an answering knock. She freezes, waits, and then raises her fist and raps. In answer, three knocks, almost jaunty, a pause, and then a fourth. She knocks again and Dylan, through the wall, replies. They don't have a code or an alphabet but it feels so good to do it, asking and replying. It goes on for long enough that when she falls asleep her dreams are wordless, composed of a series of knock-sentences, more and more elaborate, pressed through the walls around her.

Monday morning Dylan's brothers are out on the pavement, packing up the car with stuff to go to the island. They load in suitcases and bags of sandwiches. Her mother has made her porridge with honey but she leaves it on the bedside table and it goes cold. Dylan comes out and gets hustled around. She knocks on the window with her fist and he looks up and waves and then shrugs. She shrugs back. It takes them ages to leave. Someone keeps forgetting something and having to go back into the house. She gives up and goes back to bed.

That afternoon the doctor comes. Dr Theis who delivered her and who she has seen perform every year in the pantomime at the hall. The last time she saw him his face was painted with yellow and orange stripes and he had tugged his greying hair into an oiled mane. He was drunk and laughed, bending too close, asking for courage. Ruthy, Ruthy, do you have any courage?

She sees him now employed by her mother to carry the TV up the stairs. He huffs and heaves and coughs his way to her room, lugging it over the threshold.

Her mother stands in the doorway and then crosses to the window and tugs the curtains closed so that the room is bent into muted dimness, their faces softened. She turns on the TV, switches off the volume. The heat intensifies, the sweat runs down between Ruth's back and her pyjama top, glistens on Dr Theis's forehead. He sits on the side of her bed. She

recognises his elegantly sympathetic face from days of chickenpox and hand, foot and mouth. He takes her temperature, puts the cold stethoscope against her back and listens to her breathing. She is confused by his actions. Her certainty drifts, unhooks, as he feeds her Calpol, checks her pulse; was the woman in the river some consequence of sickness, then, a rising phantom from a fever she had not previously noticed? He sits back when he is done, lays his hands on his knees, smiles at her.

How are you, Ruth?

I'm OK, she says, trying to look at her mother, who has shifted to face the wall, listening.

How is school at the moment? How are your friends?

Fine, she says.

You are friends with that boy, with all the brothers, I've forgotten his name.

Dylan.

Dylan. And you're doing well at school. And do you have any nice holiday plans? The weather is so hot. Isn't it?

It's hot. I don't know, she says.

Oh yes. And are you happy? Do you feel yourself very happy at the moment? With school and with your friends?

A shaft of light through the curtain spaces itself out over his face and he resembles once more the lion, searching for bravery, tipsy and wobbly, spilling a glass of pink wine on the carpet.

At the river, she whispers, so quietly that he has to lean forward, his pink ear turned towards her. At the river. At the river I saw a woman, she says.

The flush spreads across the doctor's face, up from underneath the neck of his sweat-thinned shirt, across his cheeks.

And you are happy? he repeats, and then seems to shake himself. When girls are your age, it can start to be difficult. School gets harder and you are changing, of course, we are all always changing. It can get harder to be – he searches for the word – it can get harder to be happy.

I am happy, she says. I am happy.

Wonderful, and your wonderful mother, is she happy? Dr Theis twists to smile at Ruth's mother.

Yes, oh yes.

You're doing very well, the doctor says. I'm very pleased. Just some rest required, I'm sure.

They leave her in the room. She pushes back the thick duvet and through the window sees the doctor leave, turning his eyes up once and then, as if he has not seen her, bending to do his shoelace, leaning his foot on the wall.

Her mother brings her the toothbrush and a cup to spit into so she doesn't have to get up. She dozes. Later, maybe ten, the sounds of her parents getting ready for bed. The rattle of pretend machine-gun fire from some kid on the street. The house gets quiet enough that she can hear her parents' descent into sleep, the whistle of air in and out of her father's nose, the gentle grinding of her mother's teeth. She gets up. Her legs are jelly from lying down for so long, her hair is electric with static. She is wearing her mother's nightdress with the thin white straps, the lace panel around the ankles. She stalks downstairs, eats handfuls of crisps, standing at the cupboard, scooping until the bag is empty. At the sink she drinks water until it gets so cold it hurts her teeth. She opens the back door and the waft of night air is such grand relief, but as she is about to step out, she finds herself unable. Kitty looks up from his basket and makes a little moan of agreement: they cannot go out now. The house feels like a sick place, the curtains all drawn, silver pill packets on the counter, a jug of honey and lemon left out. Is she ill? In the sitting room she lies on her stomach on the carpet and then rises again for her father's large collection of atlases, which he showed her the year before, tracing the lines of far-off mountains. She takes one and opens it out on the floor. He showed her their city; she finds it again, with difficulty, and squints and rocks and traces her finger around until she identifies the river. The River Dash. On the map it is a thin line, fluctuating, barely anything. She can put her thumb over the spot, or thereabouts, where the woman went into the water. And then she can move her thumb and follow the river and it goes on and then, like a magic trick, leaves the land and goes into the sea. The sea is a flat, chalky stretch of blue. The coast is higgledy-piggledy and there are tiny, tiny ejections of land from it. Islands. She drags out one of the encyclopaedias, lets it thunk onto the floor, flips through. *Iran. Islam. Island.* There. *A body of land surrounded by water.* She looks at the pictures, skims some of the writing, closes the book. Changing her mind, she opens it again, finds the right page and takes the corner and folds it extravagantly. Her mother despises the mauling of books, folded pages, notes in the margins. It is a small and pleasing retribution.

It is a bad week. Every time she sneaks out of her room her mother takes her by the wrist and leads her back upstairs. Her mother keeps taking her temperature, rubbing ice cubes onto her forehead as if she is feverish. The heat notches up higher, the big fan turns slowly and does nothing. The sun crashes through her window and her room blazes, the TV turned to mute, the bedsheets chunked onto the floor, the bedside table crowded with water glasses, bowls of half-eaten soup, orange peel. Her father brings up the crossword and sits beside her bed on a chair, the pencil sticking out from the corner of his mouth, offering her clues. *Part of a house? Black Halloween animal?*

Can I come out now? she asks him.

He does not look up, only hooks the pencil out of his mouth to add some letters.

Your mama wants you to stay in bed for a bit longer, he says.

She quickly becomes an expert at knowing when her mother is out of the house. The very particular sound of her sitting on the bottom step of the stairs to put on her loafers, scooping her jangly keys from the bowl by the door. Ruth does not dare to go into the garden or out to the street but, in these moments, she leaves her bedroom, at least. Mostly she just lies on the floor of the sitting room where it is cooler, her cheek against the fireplace tiles, her arms spread. Kitty flops down beside her, panting. When the heat of her body warms her current patch, she crawls beneath the kitchen table. Her mother's insistence that she is sick feels as if it is taking her over. She holds her own wrist against her forehead and bends over the toilet, waits to throw up; although she never does. By the end of the day, she seems to have thought herself ill and when her mother takes her temperature before bed she makes a satisfied sound, turns it to face Ruth.

Forty, poor baby, she says. You must have the flu.

She lies down beside Ruth. The day is starting to cool beyond the windows and her mother's skin is dry and chilled. She strokes Ruth's hair back from her forehead, speaks to her, not words, just strange childish sounds. Ruth dozes despite herself, drifting, her mother's bony elbow beneath her head.

When you're sick, I sometimes feel ill too, her mother whispers.

Ruth sleeps and dreams of Bear Island. She is there, wearing her mother's nightdress, tacky with cooled sweat, barefooted. It is neither night

nor day, an in-between time, the moon and the sun both stirring across the cloudless sky. Her sleep is transparent, thin as gauze, she can feel her mother's hand on her forehead. She tries to find Dylan and the brothers and at times she thinks she can hear their voices, shouting, laughter, but in other moments it is just wind or animals. The island is cool and balmy, and there are trees, impossibly tall, with smooth twisted trunks and soft green leaves that she takes by the handful and shoves into her mouth, chews and swallows. The air is filled with the humming wings of birds and she feels herself lighten, her heels lifting first and then the balls of her feet, a winnowing feeling around her ribs as she leaves the ground.

The day he is due back she waits for Dylan to come home and by lunch she wants to weep with fury. Her parents tiptoe around the house, whispering in the hallway, not even flushing the chain. Her father pokes his head in a few times but diminishes at the sight of her, waves vaguely and vanishes to the church. Her mother brings up plates of food she will not eat. Kitty, who is not allowed upstairs, is brought to her room to, her mother says, cheer her up. Ruth sits on the windowsill and every car that pauses on the street makes her jerk up but it is never them. In desperation she flops to the floor and writes a list of questions to ask Dylan when he comes back. *What was the island like? Did you swim in the sea? Were there trees? What would you eat on the island if you lived there? What animals live on the island?* When her mother appears, bobbing, with a tray of toast, she crawls beneath the bed gripping the paper and waits for her to leave.

The brothers do not come back that night. While her parents sleep, she scouts around the house, restlessly, and then, furious, determined, unlocks the back door with the keys her mother has hidden in the biscuit tin and storms out. Air. The earth beneath her feet. Crickets crooning in the dying gardens. The lights in the other houses flickering off one by one until there is only the swirl of orange pollution above her. She breathes in. The house is so stale. She turns to look back at it, and despises its rising walls, the perfectly straight chimney stacks, the blank-eyed windows. Beneath her feet she thinks she feels the ground moving, breaking free. The houses are the mainland and she is on the island, carried by swift currents away.

Ruth

Her father, the priest, takes his coffee cup to the church in the mornings. Her mother, the priest's wife, carries the muddy dog through the house to the sink after his dawn walk and untangles the burrs and brambles with her fingers, soaps his white fur with washing-up liquid, burns the ticks with matches until they release.

In the church where her father preaches Ruth steals secret sips of the baptismal water, leaves folded notes to a god she is not certain she believes in down the hollow ends of the pews.

The day Dylan and his family moved in, Ruth and her mother watched from behind the curtains, saw the moving truck reversing, counted the number of beds that were carried out. The dog barked and her mother said, unimpressed: an entire football team. They were watching when the battered blue Volvo bumped up the kerb and spilled out a battalion of boys. All day Ruth listened to the noise of many feet banging up and down the stairs, laughter and shouts, arguments breaking out. That night when her father came home, he reported a harassed-looking pizza girl trying to balance at least ten boxes and ring the bell at the same time. The thin walls of their kitchen were permeated by the smell of pizza and the rattle of glasses on a table, the noise of a woman shouting, the boys whooping and leaping around. Ruth snuck out into the shadowy garden and peered through the windows. The kitchen was so full of people. She wondered if she could climb over the fence and walk up to the door and knock, be allowed inside. Someone was shouting and screaming. The back door was thrown open. She ducked down. A creature was stumbling down the garden next door. She stared until it clarified: an older boy was carrying a younger one in his arms. The younger boy was wrestling and screaming and trying

to break free. The older boy carried him down to the darkened bottom of the garden and held him, whispered things to him that she could not hear.

The next day she made friends with Dylan, who was shy and awkward, the youngest of four brothers. The pair rode their bikes down to the river and soaked like hippos and came home burnt and peeling, nettle-kissed, having traipsed the thick river ooze, their wet footprints fading on the boiling pavement before they'd gone two steps more. They dropped down into the culvert that ran along the backs of the gardens and sent paper boats bobbing along the low, heat-struck flow until they vanished into the wider mouth of the river. They lay beneath the dying cherry tree at the bottom of Ruth's garden, blissed out on heat and lemonade, flicking water at the dog whenever he edged closer. Dylan told her about his father, who had died in Kenya when his biplane went down, and how his mother had carried out the marriage bed and hacked it apart in the back garden of their old house and then packed up everything they owned.

Sometimes she would see his brother Marvin out jogging with his t-shirt off, or on his belly in the garden finishing his homework, or hear him talking on the phone to this or that girlfriend, and she would remember seeing him that first night, carrying Dylan while he screamed, waiting until he calmed. Sometimes her thoughts became murky or confused so that she imagined Marvin in her house. He had been out walking Kitty. He was holding the dog and walking through the house and filling the sink with water and suds. And now he was holding Ruth and she was crying and he was lowering her into the warm water and pulling the ticks out of her skin with his teeth. She was not sure how this had happened.

The year Ruth turns seventeen, Marvin has still only ever said three words to her directly. Once – glorious – she skidded on her bike and rode sideways across the tarmac, took off the skin from her leg. The pain like a bright illumination. Shit, Marvin said as he bent down beside her. Another time he threw her the hard cricket ball they were playing with in the garden, shouted, catch. She opened her hands to grab it and the ball fell down between them and onto the ground. Cool, he said, running over to retrieve it.

She wonders, still, what he said to his brother as he held him and whispered to him. She imagines herself holding Dylan. She is larger than him and he is shaking. She is telling him about the island. She speaks in a calming voice about the water and the cliffs and he calms and listens to her.

She is curled inside Marvin's body and she is Marvin and she can smell the pepperoni pizza on her breath and feel the weight of Dylan in her arms.

The brothers go back to the island every year, and every year Ruth tries to persuade her mother that she should go with them. For weeks she wheedles and begs and washes dishes and carries the shopping home and is polite, in hope. As the time of the visit approaches there is the inevitable breakdown in civility and her mother shouts and Ruth yells and slams doors and curses. The brothers load up the car, calling to one another, bartering about seating and snacks, and then leave. Drinking, her mother says, and worse. For the weekend they are gone the house next door is very quiet and when Ruth knocks on the wall with her fist there is no reply. It is the way it was before they moved in and she was lonely in a way she did not have a word for until it was different. Before Dylan and his brothers came she existed in that house, she was part of the walls and the furniture, she felt the click of the front door locking as her father closed up for the night.

Sometimes she thinks she is going mad longing for a place she has never even been. Well, it is every place that is not that house and town, it is beyond the door of her bedroom and at the end of the river.

Something fries the fuse box at school and the electricity goes off. They all get sent home early. It is summer again, not yet the holiday, nearly the end of term. In a couple of weeks it is Ruth's and Dylan's seventeenth birthday. One day a year, and it is always that one, the ants grow wings and try to fly and their bodies coat the windscreens of cars, jam up the bottoms of doorways, cover the street lights so that the air has a toxic, sepia glow. Dylan's older brothers, home for the warm months, have bought cheap paddling pools in bulk from the big new shopping centre and covered the garden with them, filled them from the snaky green hose. Everyone strips to their underwear and submerges themselves up to the nostrils. Under the water Ruth's skin is almost blue. The paddling pools, already a week past erected, swill with mud and dying ants. When she looks up, she catches Dylan's brothers watching her from the corners of their eyes, pretending not to, their quiet giving them away. This is new, perhaps only days old, an unfamiliar power. The way they see her nearly translucent white underwear, the choppy shimmer of her badly cut hair moving like seaweed under the water, the lids of her eyes she allows to close. She knows they have warned

Dylan off her. Dylan told her, sheepish, laughing, one morning at school. Marvin, just back from selling cars, a job he despises, their dead father's cheap suit at least one size too small, told Dylan he thought Ruth has a bad vibe.

The brothers loll, talking shit, making up words to describe the way hedgehogs move. The cherry tree in Ruth's garden has been dying for years now. The inside of the trunk is hollowing out, chipping away. But it bloomed this spring, enormously, and now is losing all its leaves in great handfuls, spiralling down into the scummy paddling pools, coating their skin, wrinkled from being in water too long. The beer and the water in the pools are the same temperature. There's a crackling electricity to the way the skin of the sky hangs above the roofs of the buildings and the way the webs between their fingers and toes hurt, the particular orange radial explosions in Marvin's pupils. She rotates lazily in the water, her legs squeaking on the damp plastic. Kitty creeps over and laps at the water from the pool and then flops in the shade.

Are you going to that party? Stevie says. He is not speaking to them, turning his head away as Dylan asks, what party?

Marvin flicks water. I don't know. I'm sick of parties. Aren't you sick of beer and parties and hanging out?

Nope, Neil says, I'm just sick of hanging out with you in these slimy pools.

These pools are the highlight of my life, they are the best idea I ever had. What party? Dylan says.

You aren't invited, Marvin says.

No babies allowed, Stevie says, and opens another can.

Ruth tips back her head. From her angle the dying cherry tree looks like it has upturned from the ground and its roots are in the sky. A movement in the house, her mother looking out at them, and then, seen, moving away. These days her mother is salty and silent, messages to Ruth relayed through her father or on pieces of paper stuck to the front door or folded into Ruth's shoes.

I'm going to lie here until I turn into a raisin, Marvin says. Dill, you'll have to get me another beer.

I'm not getting you a beer, are you joking?

You'll have to, up you go.

Ruth can feel Dylan turning sour and miserable next to her, the way he does when his brothers jostle or joke at him. She brushes his leg with her foot in the pool and watches his skin goosebump.

What party? she says, mainly for him.

Marvin and Stevie and Neil gaze at her, thoughtful.

No babies, Stevie says, although the end of the sentence is tipped into a question.

It's by the river, Marvin says. Don't come empty-handed.

There are bats above the water, wheeling. She wears one of Dylan's brothers' t-shirts, stolen from the washing line. They ride their bikes. The large rusted party boat is chugging up and down the brown river, blaring out show tunes. The grass off the towpath is yellow with buttercups. A trail of bonfire smoke. The ground is ragged enough that they push their bikes. Her hands sweat on the handlebars. She has not been here in years. The jagged heart-line bashed through the meadow grass. The sticky buzz of mosquitos landing delicately on their bare arms, their cheeks.

When they were younger, she would knock on the wall – the way that they still do – in the morning and then roll out of bed. She would creep downstairs, go out into the garden and let herself in through the back door of Dylan's house. So many people sleeping there that the walls seemed to breathe. She would shake Dylan awake, drag him out of bed. Sometimes she would see Marvin, fuzzy-headed, pissing with the door open. She brought cans of energy drink and chocolate bars to bribe Dylan with. He was always grumpy with tiredness. They'd go down to the river, here, to this little cut. Sometimes in really cold winters there was ice at the edges and the spiderwebs on the bulrushes trembled with snow. Dylan would sit on his haunches and chug cans as she searched for signs in the muddy banks. What was she looking for? She never quite knew. Some significant certainty that she had been there. That woman.

When she looks back Dylan is uncertain, dragging behind a bit.

Come on, she says.

Let's just go watch a film, he says. She keeps going. Ahead: a whole mess of people, music, bikes abandoned on their sides. Drunk already, scatty hands, laughing. She recognises a couple from their class although mostly everyone is old enough that she knows of them but has never spoken to them, back from university for the summer or settled down with jobs.

She sees one of the girls who left the year before and whose belly is large and rounded, pregnant, swaying. There is an old white bathtub with the legs hacked off, filled with melting ice and cans of beer. She cracks one for Dylan and he does the same for her, his thumb missing the catch and skidding off. They drink uneasily, looking at one another, bulging their cheeks in exaggerated fear and uncertainty at the fact of their being there. Someone slaps her on the back and when she looks it is Marvin, his jaw churning, his eyes a bit off.

Hey ho, he says, hey ho, hey ho.

A girl comes up behind him, just about smiling.

You should party with us, she says to Ruth. Is this your baby brother? she asks Marvin, and he laughs in answer and clonks his nose against Dylan's, a bit too hard.

The girl takes Ruth's hand and tows her over to the edge of the narrow river where some of them are swimming, naked, chucking the water up so that it catches the edge of the summer moon. Dylan dogs after her, uncertain, trying to take her other hand. She lets him, holds him.

Later, drunker, the nightingale sky is rife with movement. Her skin is raw, itchy. She gets caught up with confusion, cannot find the edges of herself. Dylan sleeps on his side in the mud and when she goes to check on him, she finds that someone has drawn on his face with a permanent marker, little ejaculating cocks around his mouth, the word *CUNT* on his forehead. She wets her fingers, tries to rub it away. Someone says her name. When she looks up Marvin is laughing at her. She tries to say, I can't, or, help me, but the words won't clarify.

Yeah, Marvin says, peering over her shoulder at Dylan. That sucks. Should have stayed home. Right?

She isn't sure what he wants her to agree with. Yeah, she says.

You two are so funny, he says, wagging his head.

We aren't.

Don't get insulted. You are. You're so weird together.

We're friends. Best friends. She's buoyed by booze and finds herself carrying on, not quite sure where she's going with it. We've been friends for ages, there aren't any other friends like us. We knock messages through the walls of our houses to one another, I bet you didn't know that?

He stares at her.

What? she says.

Well, he's out of his depth.

OK.

Are you out of your depth?

There is something in his words. She tries to focus on his face. She can't remember what she drank last but it's making her mouth taste like soil. A sound nearby, clashing. When she looks a kid is kicking at her bike, or Dylan's, going at it. She picks herself up, shoves at him.

Fuck off.

The kid laughs, stumbles.

That's OK, Marvin says, coming up behind her. What are you so angry about?

She takes his hand.

What is it, Ruth W? What you looking for?

She – barely believing herself as she does it – snags the rim of his boxers and pulls them away from his bony hips, lets them snap back into place. He makes a sound, maybe even surprise. She mimics it, not mocking, wanting to feel it in her mouth. She lurches at him and he doesn't move so they crack together. He tastes beautiful and awful, like old coffee, and his fingers have flat ends, small spades, digging at her. She imagines herself earth, unearthed.

Dylan and she sleep in until past midday, cramped in his bed, the stink of the booze seeping out of their skin. She gets up to crack the window and then, when the smell doesn't diminish, ducks out into the corridor. She spits in the bathroom sink, tries to sort out her hair, washes the grit from her face, steals one of the toothbrushes from the cup. At the taste of the bristles, she remembers what happened with Marvin and has to slap her hand over her mouth to keep the buffet of laughter in. In that house – the toilet seat pushed up, a cup of ten toothbrushes with splayed bristles – it feels ridiculous. In the hallway the door to one of the other bedrooms is ajar and she edges closer, thinking that maybe Marvin will be sleeping in there and wanting to catch a sight of him. The bed is empty, the duvet chucked onto the floor. She has stayed with Dylan overnight countless times, but she has never been in this room. There are Manchester United posters on the walls, the stink of dirty football boots, stacked cereal bowls on the desk. She steps inside, shuts the door behind her. She's a bit dizzy, hungover, and the room gets all tipped around her so that she feels sick and then clarity-filled. The

room is towards the front of the house, the way hers is, with a window looking out onto the street. She realises, stunned, that it is this room, not Dylan's at all, that she shares a wall with. She remembers weeks and weeks of no replies as she knocked (some stubborn agreement she thought they shared that they would not speak of the knocking) and then, last week, the week Marvin came to live at home again, the knocking resumed.

She goes back out into the corridor. There is the smell, from downstairs, of bacon. She hunts for it, barefooted, stale-mouthed, starving hungry. Neil is asleep on the sofa, legs splayed over the armrest. Marvin is in the kitchen, scraping bacon around the pan with the spatula, drinking Diet Coke. When he sees her, he seems to blanch and then steadies himself, rounding his shoulders, *like, whatever*, and picks up one of the rashers straight from the pan, gives it to her. It burns her fingers and she drops it on the table. Marvin digs in the bread basket for a loaf, hands her some slices. She gets the ketchup out the fridge. The sandwich is so good, hitting her stomach. She gets a wave of sureness. He's diminished after last night, his bravado not hitting. She remembers his flat fingers touching her and looks at them, resting on the table. The hilarity that built up in the bathroom has caved in beneath the understanding that it was him, and not Dylan, who has been tapping messages through the wall. For how long? For a long time.

What you doing? he says.

What? she says.

Like, staring at my hands. You're so weird.

Your fingers are weird, she says.

It's all good, he says.

I know that.

She wants. She wants suddenly, the way she wanted the bacon when she smelled it. She feels almost senseless beneath it, made unclever. She skids across a chair so she is closer to him. He examines her. She takes his hand and holds his fingers and then moves them between her legs.

You're batshit, he says. She doesn't know if this is a compliment or not, doesn't really care either way. The uncaring is like an excellent explosion, opening everything. The want has the narrative of a song, going up and down, occasionally receding into almost-panic, which she dulls. He moves clumsily and she straightens his hand, changing his direction of travel. She puts the fingers of his other hand into her mouth, the action following the thought almost immediately, and he tastes of ketchup and bacon and bread.

Through the wall of the kitchen, she can hear her mother's voice, the kettle coming to a boil, the dog's claws clicking on the tiles. You're batshit, he murmurs again.

The next day she's late leaving school. The cleaners are in the yellow corridors, Hoovering up, calling to one another. Her mother has signed her up to netball, drama, book club, extra maths classes, and she doesn't have an evening free anymore. She gets her bag and starts to walk home. Dylan said he would wait for her but he's forgotten and isn't in the car park. She hangs around for a bit and then gives up. She takes the slightly longer route so that she doesn't pass the church, where she knows her father is looking out for her to come and help him. The road is quiet and there is the noise of her shoes with their hard heels on the ground. A car passes her, slowing, and then goes into a side street, reverses, comes back. It drives at walking pace next to her. She keeps her head down and at the traffic lights she outpaces it, crosses over. Someone is calling for her.

Hey, listen, hey.

It's Marvin, he's parked the car and is running across the road.

Come on, he says.

She pauses, doesn't move.

It's not my car, he says as if this will sell it, it's from the garage. It's got leather seats. You know?

She doesn't. He takes her hand. There is still some uncanny power to him, unbroken, and she, unwilling, is bowed beneath it. His bottom, the slope of his back, the beauty of his fingers and what they make her think of. He's like a boy, keen, but at the same time, he's a grown-up and always has been, his girlfriend painting faces at her tenth birthday party, his arms around Dylan beneath the tree. She dreams and dreams and dreams that he will carry her to the bottom of the garden and hold her in the thrumming black while she loses all semblance of herself.

I don't know what you mean, she says.

Come on, he says, come on, stop dithering, you duck, you goose. Let's go.

He drives the car back to the school and parks it in the car park. There are no other cars there, the windows are dark and the games field stretches up towards the spinney of trees where the old tennis courts stand. A girl died

there a couple of years ago, was electrocuted in a storm. Ruth imagines him stripped of his clothes, imagines him in the river, the spinney of his bones like the trees underneath skin. She feels breathless at the immediacy of him and she thinks about his penis and then gets freaked out because, surely, he can hear her. He reaches over and touches her leg, near the knee, and she remembers, and says, I'm on my period. He withdraws his hand.

That's OK. If it's cool with you.

She isn't entirely sure what this means but she says yes, and opens the door of the car and gets out. She looks around at the car park, which is mostly mud and gravel. She crosses away from the car and towards the far bank and then wrangles her sports trousers down, her underwear. Behind her the headlights flash on and everything is illuminated. She thinks maybe he is doing this to help, so that she can see, and then she understands that it is not a matter of her seeing but of him. She turns and looks at the car but the lights are so bright that she cannot see him within it, only the windscreen like a switched-off television. She reaches down and takes the end of the tampon string and pulls it out and holds it up to show him or to show the car and then the action becomes hilarious and she shouts with laughter and stretches back her arm and throws the tampon as far as she can. Someone will find it tomorrow, she thinks. She stands looking in the direction it went. The car door opens. Sound returns. You weirdo, he shouts, come over here, you weirdo.

She crosses the car park back to him, breathing and thinking about what is going to happen and trying to come up with some kind of plan which she can follow. The distance is not great enough. She is still clueless by the time she gets there. He seems pretty clueless too, kind of shy, neither of them drunk or drunkenly hungover this time, the roof of the car and the headrest and the steering wheel getting in the way so she keeps whacking herself on them. Shit, he says when she clonks her head, and then, again, later, oh shit. It's not particularly extraordinary in the way she has always imagined it would be. She imagined, perhaps, a removal of self, but she remains very present the entire time, thinking stray words about his face and hands and body, thinking, that's good, or that's a bit uncomfortable actually, and then thinking about how she's going to get home, will he drive her, does she want him to drive her? Then a period of blankness, like static, filled with a self-consciousness about what she must look like, about the bits of her zoomed in upon, as if, really, it is herself she's having sex with, observed in

a shrewd, critical way. After that a hastening, as if they are running to catch the bus, probably won't make it. There's blood on the leather upholstery. She sits in the passenger seat while he curses, in his boxers, bent over from outside, spitting on his hand and trying to scrub it off. I'm so fucked, he moans, I'm so screwed. She notices above his shoulder the trees lit from beneath by a street light so that she can see each of the branches, like spiderwebs.

I'll drive you back, yeah?

Thanks, she says.

The conversation on the way home is centred on the blood. He thinks maybe that salt gets it out? Is that right? But won't salt scratch the leather? Or red wine – do you, like, throw a load of red wine on it? That doesn't sound good, does it? What does she think?

I'm not sure, she says.

He pulls over at the top of the road where they both live. She opens the door and ejects her legs out of it. He is hulked up in a crab position, scrubbing at the blood again. She has a sense, looking at him, that this is probably the last time they will do this and she finds herself wanting to say something extraordinary, or cool, to mark the moment. She can't think of anything. He does not look up at her. He looks ridiculous. She walks back along the road and then twists, returns.

Let's go to the island, she says.

He doesn't seem to hear her, swears under his breath.

That island you go camping on every year. Let's go there in the car.

Nah, I have to get this out.

Don't be dumb, let's go there now.

I can't kidnap you. Your mum scares me.

I'll go home then, and we leave later. Yeah?

He looks up at her then, breathes. You're a loony.

Sure. I know. Shall we go then?

OK. He shrugs. Why not.

I'll be outside at midnight, right, she says, and turns before he can change his mind.

Some mornings she takes the window just to annoy her mother, legs akimbo either side of the drainpipe, appearing at the back door, the dog freaking out through the glass, Ruth's hands green with moss from the walls. It is

different in the dark, like dropping down a well. She lands badly, goes down onto her bottom in the flower bed. An owl like a flying bride streaking along the street. She lingers in the road for an hour, waiting; but he does not come.

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Ruth

As Ruth's belly gets bigger she will not sleep, only lie naked and giant and tensed on the floor and listen to the sound of knocking through the thin walls of the house, the noise of the TV downstairs. She will try to pray using her father's voice, allowing it into her throat, but the words stick somewhere between gullet and brain and cannot be released. When her mother comes three times a day to her door with trays of chicken sandwiches and vitamin tablets and plastic glasses of orange juice, she will attempt to scream her into submission, and then she will plead. Nothing works. One night she will wake to the sound of someone throwing bird-shat cherry stones at her window. She does not know what time it is. The baby in her stomach has been keeping her awake with its own morse code, here an elbow, here a knee. She will get up and stand at the window. Someone in the flowerbed, arm raised, face hidden. It is Marvin, she will think, he has got his shit together, he is getting her out. Another stone plinking against the glass. Yes, she holds up her hand, yes, I'm coming.

The first day after the positive pregnancy tests, she comes home to find her mother in her bedroom with the toolbox. She has brought the radio up for company and the house is filled with Classic FM. There is a new shining bolt on the outside of the door, a jangling chain. Ruth does not know how her mother knew when she barely did herself. The music is loud enough that her mother does not notice her there, frozen in the doorway. Ruth leaves and does not come back for three days. She and Dylan cruise playgrounds, the riverbank, the parks. She sleeps in his bed, wedged against the wall, his shanky hip bone pressed against her side. She throws up at school, six or seven times a day, hunkered down over the toilet if she can get there but more often in the rubbish bin in the corner of the classroom, caught in Dylan's outstretched hands. She had thought you couldn't get

pregnant on your period; turns out she was wrong. They live off cold pizza and chocolate bars. She does not know where Marvin is. He is not at the house. When her mother starts coming to Dylan's house and demanding her return, they break into the sports hall at school and sleep under towels nabbed from open lockers, the smell of mildew, the creak of the old vaulted ceiling keeping her awake. They can't keep it up forever.

She straggles back for clean underwear and a change of t-shirt. It is so early in the morning that the neighbourhood cats are still out hunting, clinging to the wooden fences, wowowowing. She strokes the dog, steals ice cream from the freezer and stands eating it with a spoon at the counter, then bends her head to drink water from the tap. She keeps expecting her mother to sense her there and appear. She stands at the bottom of the stairs and listens but there is nothing to hear. She misses her parents with something like grief. She goes up the stairs and stands in the door of their bedroom. Her bare feet are filthy, her hair is greasy, her fingers are stained. They are sleeping, her father lying on his back like a corpse, arms by his sides, her mother curled, her face soft and young. Ruth goes and kneels beside the bed. Part of Ruth, more and more, wants to go into her own bedroom and wake up to find the door locked. Was that true? She does not want to be in charge of this situation, she wants someone to tell her what to do.

Mama, she says.

Her mother comes awake immediately, jerking up onto her elbows, and says her name twice, Ruth, Ruth, and then grows still, lies back.

Mama, Ruth says, and puts her head down onto her mother's stomach, the jut of her ribs like the domed ceiling of the church. Mama, I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

Ruth, her mother says. They are the only people awake in the whole world. Her mother opens her arms out wide. Ruth crawls over her and into the space between her parents' bodies. The room smells like toothpaste, old air. She holds her breath.

When she wakes up later it is daytime and she is alone. Someone undressed her while she slept, put her into pyjamas. She is so tired but something is wrong and when she sits up on her elbows, she knows that she is in her own bed, the door is closed. She goes and rattles the handle but it will not give. She can feel the new pressure points of the bolt, the jangling chain. She

jerks back the curtain and tries to wrench the window open but she can see the glinty nails driven into the frame. She goes back to the door and shakes the handle again, and shouts. When she goes quiet, she can hear movement on the stairs beyond but no one answers when she calls out. Through the window she sees her father leaving down the front path and when she slams on the glass with her fists he pauses, then continues slowly away. She goes back and works at the door until she is sweating and dizzy with nausea but it will not budge. When she looks down, searching for the source of pain, her nails are bleeding. She shouts for her mother but the house seems to swallow the words. She lies down on the bed and tries to think what to do but her thoughts are darting animals, beyond comprehension. There is a noise through the wall at her head and, when she sits up, it comes again, more purposeful this time, the rap of someone's fist on the plaster. She remembers Marvin shrugging beside the sluggish river, in the kitchen of his house, fingers greasy with bacon fat; her realisation that it is his wall that abuts her bedroom, has been his knocking messages through the years. She gets on her haunches and knocks back, three times, quickly. They knock and knock and knock. It goes on until her mother raps at the door, clears her throat, speaks through the wood.

I have lunch for you.

Ruth gets off the bed and balances on the balls of her feet. She thinks of rushing her mother when she opens the door, forcing her backwards, knocking her down. She thinks of killing her. She imagines them running forever, she and Marvin, on the island, feral. The island is a safe place, no one will find them there, her mother will never, ever find them there. Her mother nudges the door open and stands looking at her, holding the tray. There is a bowl of soup and a sandwich, a cup of tea, even a round iced cupcake still in its frilled paper skirt.

Let me out, Mama, let me out.

It's carrot soup, her mother says. And a cupcake from Polly from book group. Everything is going to be alright. Do you want me to bring Kitty up to keep you company? This is a good plan. We will keep you safe in here, we can home-school, lots of people do it, and no one will know about the baby, and when the baby comes, we will find them a good home. And you can go on with your life. Don't you want to go on?

Something passes between them, like boiling water or scalding air, and she sees her mother flinch at whatever must be moving over her face, feels,

then, her own lips rising in a snarl or a grimace. She is moving. Her mother is faster. She retreats, the door is not slammed but eased shut, the lock drawn gently across. Ruth has gone from herself, is screaming and bashing at the door. She can hear her mother crying on the other side.

My hand is against the door, Ruth, can you feel it, just above the handle. Put your hand on the other side. Put your hand where my hand is. I will bring you food when you are calm.

For a time, she is sustained by a pure rage that ignites the dim days and deafens the endless nights. She rushes at her mother whenever she opens the door, fingers clawed, teeth bared. The tray is shoved in across the floor. She picks up, one by one, the bowl, the plate, the cup of hot tea, and dashes them to the ground, chucks them against the wall, spraying carrot soup, stamping the bread beneath her bare heels, lobbing the tray against the closed door.

The anger diminishes. She eats the sandwiches, and when she asks for biscuits, cold lemonade, packets of salt-in-the-bag crisps, her mother brings them. She is sustained by Marvin's knocking against the wall beside her head, a morning greeting, a bedtime farewell that sometimes goes on for nearly an hour. She imagines messages into the rapping and when she does dream the sound is carried bodily within her, so that she wakes and her taut belly is responding, rap, rap, rap. She holds her hands over the skin and the baby knocks its own secret messages to her. She sits and scans the street out of the window. She knows the particular system the bin men have when they come on Thursdays and what time the neighbours across the way leave for work and when they come home again. She is sustained by the times she hears Dylan coming to the door, trying to get inside and up the stairs, shouting to her. She is sustained by the sight of the brothers out on the road, staring up. Marvin is never there. She is sustained by thoughts of the island. It cruises low through the room, breaching the rumpled bedsheets, rising up the dimming walls with the day. She thinks about the lighthouse Dylan described to her once, a tall, straight white building with inaccessible floors above, the downstairs strewn with beer cans. For a time, she tries to draw the island in the backs of her school exercise books but her drawing is poor, the sketches disappointing, and she soon gives up. It lingers all the same, a soft relief, getting bigger.

One evening when she gets up from the bed everything spins. There is vomit in her throat and she is on her knees before she realises she is going down. Her cheek against the carpet, the ceiling revolving like a dance floor. Her hands are thumping but she is out of herself and doesn't seem in charge of them. There is a wet blanket of imagining that comes down and covers everything. She is on a blanket, slick with sun cream, and there is a child, running and then bending over a rockpool. She can hear other voices behind them, they are not alone. She knows that she is safe there. The child has found a starfish – her hands are beating and she has bitten her tongue, tastes blood. Never mind. She is cruising down the River Dash on her back, like an otter, and she knows that the water will take her there eventually, if only she can be patient enough.

Dr Theis comes back. There has been some kind of agreement made. He is in a thick wool coat with a silken lining. The room smells of urine from the bucket she has been using and of the spilled soup which dried down the back of the radiator. It is night-time and the moon is fat and full and she is staring at it and trying to count how long she has been in there. The days are like a ball of wool which she once tightly wound and which has now unspooled all around her. She cannot find the end of it. The doctor comes into the room alone, hands raised, head ducked a bit. She can hear the scrabble of her mother beyond, pulling the bolt back.

Hello Ruth, he says very quietly. He approaches her, hands still raised. She wonders what he thinks she will do to him. She has been lying on the bed and lying on the floor, she has been sitting on the windowsill and with her back against the door; she is wasted and useless. He holds his palms towards her and then moves his hands down slowly and plants them on her belly. He kneads and pushes and says, more to himself than to her: head, leg, knee, bottom. His hands press down quite hard and she feels how the baby flips and turns.

Let me out, she says.

He looks at her with interest, as if she might have said something about a book she is reading and enjoying very much. She knows that her mother is listening at the door. It does not matter.

Let me out, she says again.

I'm going to give you some medication, your blood pressure is a little low. Your mother will give you one a day. Ruth, if you need to talk to me, I

am always here. Your mother can bring you the phone and we can speak. We can speak in the middle of the night if you want to. We can speak anytime. I am your doctor. Your mother tells me that you have been thinking of hurting yourself to hurt the baby. These are terrible thoughts but I will listen to you. You are safe here.

He looks at her belly rather than her face.

No, she says.

And your mother has a tea for you, I think. She has made you a cup of tea. She can bring it in now.

She watches black-and-white films with the dog sprawled across her belly, she eats brownies her mother bakes, she reads library books that appear and then disappear as she sleeps. She sleeps. She is woken because her feet are cramping and her belly is aching. She marches back and forth across the room because it calms the baby inside her and because she worries that she will waste away, the way astronauts do in space. Sometimes she yells, calling for Dylan or just to hear herself, shouting her own name over and over and over, just to piss off her mother, who frowns when she brings in the tray, stands cross-armed until Ruth swallows her pill. Sometimes Dylan shouts back; once she thinks he gets inside the house and makes it nearly up the stairs before they drag him out. Marvin normally knocks in the morning when he wakes, waking her, and then again at night, and this, aside from the light, is the only way she can really tell which side of the day is up and which down.

Sometimes when she wakes her mother is in the bed beside her, curled up, sleeping. They doze through the morning, wake again, the smell of her mother's unbrushed teeth, the fuzz of her hair knotting on the shared pillow. I remember when you were born, her mother tells her, and looks at but does not touch the taut skin of her belly.

She knocks on the wall. The knocking means: *I am still here, don't forget me, I am still here, hello, hello.* For a week there is no reply. She knocks and knocks and knocks. She crouches on the bed and presses her head flat against the wall and listens for any noise coming through but there is nothing. She flattens her palm and hits the wall and then curls her fingers and strikes it so hard that her hands bruise purple and she cannot open and

close her fingers for a day. She crocodiles off the bed and picks up the empty plate from breakfast and she throws it.

Later it is dark. When she looks at the carpet there are red footprints the size of her feet crossing back and forth from the window to the wall and, in her heel, she finds a shard of ceramic as big as her thumb. She jerks it free, drops it to the ground, rolls over to sleep.

When she wakes in the morning her mother is on hands and knees, scrubbing. There is the stink of bleach and the slosh of a bucket of water. She is trying to get the blood out of the carpet. The sight of her mother there reminds Ruth of Marvin, rubbing at the blood on the seat of his car, and she laughs and laughs while her mother ignores her and then she rolls over, sleeps again.

When she hears the knocking once more, after a long time of silence, she thinks it is coming from inside her. She puts both hands on her belly but the baby is still. She gets up off the floor, climbs onto the bed, presses her ear to the wall, knocks once to say that she is listening. There is a flurry of sound, two hands at least, hitting the wall hard enough that it vibrates under her head. Then it stops. She does not know what it means. She knocks tentatively and it comes again, a storm of banging, which then ceases. There is some message there, although she cannot tell what and she wants to know. She stays awake. She roams around and comes back to the wall and knocks again but there is no reply. In a sudden panic she packs a bag, shoving clothes in, clean underwear from the pile her mother delivers every other day. She puts the bag beside the window and she sits on the sill. The moon is very round. The baby inside her says *hello, hello, hello*. She does not know when the baby will come, she is so big, she does not know how long she has been this way. She puts her head against the glass and looks out at the street. Movement, down on the road. The moon has been covered by clouds and though she can see there is a person there she cannot make out their face. Something strikes the window hard enough that she jerks back. And then another and another. Small objects, tapping the glass. It is now, she thinks, and she feels the hyperthermic daze of these months shedding from her. Down on the street they are waving their arms. She waves back and then turns to regard the room. She has regarded it in this way before, searching for weapons, but she is clearer now, the fog gone. She needs to break the window. She needs to do it and then she needs to get

out before her parents can stop her. She picks up the water glass from beside the bed and then puts it down. She goes to the window and the figure is still there, waiting. She goes and stands next to the TV and then pulls the plug from the wall and wrestles it up into her arms, atop her stomach. She takes it over to the window. She has considered doing this before but has never known where she would go. She hopes that they, it must be Marvin, perhaps Dylan is around the corner, have a plan. Her arms are beginning to give way and the weight on top of her belly is painful. The dog downstairs has started to bark. Ruth needs to go faster. She shifts the TV in her arms and then swings her body, gathering momentum, before throwing it towards the window. The sound is very loud. The window shatters. On the street the figure is dancing, in excitement or panic. She has climbed this way many times before but never when pregnant. Her balance is screwed, her legs are wobbly from being locked in for so long. She imagines falling. Behind her in the house she can hear the sound of her mother wailing and the rattle as she tries to get the door unlocked. Ruth has to go now. She swings herself round to the drainpipe and clings and clings. She can hear the person on the street whispering her name, urging her to hurry. She climbs down, halfway, nearly falls, her hands slick, her feet fumbling for purchase. At the ground she falls on her backside into the flower bed. Someone heaves her up. When she looks, it is Dylan. Run, he says, run.

They stake out at the river, among the trees, out of sight of the nearby canal boats. There is a footpath not far from where they sleep and, sometimes, they hear the noises of dog walkers, joggers, and have to hide. One very early morning when she crawls to the bush where she urinates, she finds three fishermen sitting in the gloaming, their rods bobbing ahead of them, their legs slung over the bank. She is in her bra and a pair of Dylan's tracksuit bottoms, which she has had to split at the waist to fit. Her stomach is enormous. They pretend not to see her. They sit so quietly, their hats beside them on the bank, their tackle boxes cracked open, their thermoses of coffee, such a gentle morning, to sit there waiting for fish, she wishes herself into them, inside of them, the feel of their worn shoes on her feet; and when she wakes later, they are gone.

She gets at Dylan again. He cringes and pats the air, trying to quiet her. Shush, he says, shush, shush. What are we going to do, she says, what are we going to do? The night she smashed the window and dropped down into

the flower bed he appeared beside her, trembling, smiling, waving a handful of keys. They loaded into the Volvo, got as far as the edge of town before she noticed the petrol light, glowing red. Some plan, she yelled at him as he blinked and rubbed the steering wheel. Some plan this is. They left the car where it was, climbed out. She hadn't even remembered the bag she packed. They could get the bus, she said as they walked along the main road, they could take the bus to the city. Except Dylan had no money. She railed at him. He looked as if he might cry. She weakened beneath the sight of him there, trying to save her, and beneath the feel of air for the first time in so long, the smell of diesel, leaves, concrete, the river. They got to the bridge. There was shouting in the distance. They stood, panicking, didn't know where to go. Come on, Ruth said, and led him down onto the towpath and to the fields.

They thought they would only stay a few days but a week later they were still there, without money or any plan beyond this: sleeping in a tangle of undergrowth in sleeping bags Dylan's brothers had snuck out to them.

I don't know what to do, Dylan says.

She doesn't know what to say to him. He is here. At least. He is here.

Where's Marvin? she says.

He shrugs. He's been gone for ages, he doesn't come back anymore. I moved into his room.

You were knocking? she says.

He stares at her. Yeah. Of course. I wanted you to know I was there.

Dylan goes to get the food that his brother Stevie leaves at the football field, hidden in one of the bushes. When she touches her belly, wincing, the skin is pulled incredibly tight, like clingfilm over a bowl. Her feet hurt. She walks along the river, back and forth, sticking to the covered areas beneath the trees so no one will spot her from the bridge. Dylan comes back with half a loaf of stale bread and some crisps. They eat in silence and then do the crossword in the newspaper that the bread was wrapped in. Her head feels like candyfloss and she can't get any of the answers. There's pain, in her stomach, like someone has grabbed the skin on her back and pulled it tight. She grumps around, can't get comfortable, snaps at Dylan until he sulks, slinks away to escape her.

When twilight comes, she hears music. There have been parties there a couple of times, the kids from school, and always they have hidden deeper

in the cow fields, keeping out of sight. She ducks into the undergrowth and listens to the sound of voices calling to one another, drunken laughter, the splash of someone going, or thrown, into the river. There's the smell of bonfire and then, making her mouth water, cooking meat. Dylan comes back, as if he knows what she's thinking, hisses at her.

No, stop.

She ignores him, shakes off his hand and then takes it in hers, tugs him along. They appear from the bushes. The party is further along the bank, in an open stretch of field. They've lit a hay bale on fire. Her sense of smell is so strong that she can make out a bottle of cider cracked open, the stink of alcopops fizzing on the dirt. Someone sees them coming and then everyone is staring. She recognises almost all of them. She looks for Marvin but he isn't there.

What the fuck, a girl says to her.

Yeah, she says.

Someone gives her a beer and someone else says no she can't drink that, but she does, tipping it, seeing in the motion of her head knocked back some other time or other direction, the warm foam, the slight cut of the scissored can in her bottom lip. It doesn't really taste of anything but the bubbles hurt as they hit her belly and beneath that hurt is something deeper, like rings in a tree, going down. People keep bringing her things, like offerings. She eats three burgers very quickly. Dylan stands with his arms hanging and people congratulate him and laugh and he doesn't say anything, doesn't correct them. People are dancing and she dances too because it feels good, her legs wet, her belly sunk right down, her knees wobbling. Then, it is too much, and she shoulders a path through them, through the shaky music, through the muffle of empty beer cans crushed beneath bare feet. She looks for Dylan but can't see him. She goes down to the water where there are sloped banks leading to the grey river, hanging willows dipping to feed. There's a stink to the water and the sheen of boat oil at the edges but the reeds are fluted and when she takes off her shoes and submerges her feet the cold is such a good burn. There. Pain. Longer, stronger, unmistakable. Fine. Here it comes here it comes. She bends to dip her fingers. Here, again, like fists closing and opening, almost intolerable. When she focuses again the sound has gone from behind her, maybe the party is over. The skin above the surface of the river is groped by mosquitos, she feels them landing on her arms and face. A movement at the

corner of her vision. When she turns the river is a telescope between the arcs of the trees and she remembers that this is very close to where she saw, when she was ten, the woman wading into the water. She is pulled under by a tide of fierce agony, not in her stomach but low in her spine, like someone closing their hand crushingly over her tailbone. She is so afraid. The pain has legs and walks over her. She tries to gird herself but there is nothing to hold on to. She stumbles further into the water, and the cold cuts a line across the tops of her thighs. She knows this river. She knows the way it moves over the fields, turning back on itself; and she knows, although she has not seen it, that it goes on through other towns and countryside and cities and on until the sea. It strikes her, bent within agony, that the water around her feet is the same water that touches the island and that giving birth here would be like a message: *here I come, here I come*. The pain goes on and pain again. She doesn't know the language of this. She tries to find the word for it in her hands, just to pin it down. Pain bridges into pain. Time takes the edges of itself and folds like an envelope away from and around her and the baby is coming, the baby is coming.

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Part Three

A DAY IN JANUARY

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Jupjaapun

When she looks at the clock on the dashboard it is nearly four o'clock in the morning and time for Nora's show to start. It is January. She turns on the radio, clicks through the channels, eyes on the road. It is a long straight road.

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Eva

At the apex of the evening the new waiter drops a bottle of red wine. Eva is in the kitchen, leaning forward to wipe the edge of a plate, shifting her weight off her aching feet, thinking at the same time: two whipped goat cheese, message Min, check delivery for tomorrow. The crash of the smashing bottle is preceded by a shout of horror, almost a word, not quite, and then the volcanically loud noise of the glass breaking. She pushes the door of the kitchen open. The wine has gone in a long arc, up the edge of some of the white tablecloths, soaking the shoes of the waiter whose hands are in the air still, fist clenched around an absent bottle. The restaurant is full and silent, turned to look. In the quiet the noise of the metronomes on the tables is very loud. The waiter gets on his knees to clean up. The kitchen is busy, almost out of control. The delivery company which brings them their produce lost one of their crates and at the last minute the menu had to be changed.

Part Four

INTO THE RIVER DASH

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Ori

She wears the black dress to the date and she arrives early. All day there has been a claggy clinging swelter. The tarmac has melted and cooled, melted and cooled, and, now, is cracked across the road in fissures; the pavements are sticky with Calippo and crushed cigarettes. She wears the black dress and pauses on the doorstep of the pub, prepares carefully how she will order. At the bar there is a melee and then, sooner than expected, an opening. The bartender has an impatient stare. He pours her the wrong drink, spattering the glass. She takes it, goes out into the garden. The tables are all full. She sits on the grass, balancing the drink. Takes a big mouthful. She looks at everyone to see if they are Eva. They are not. She drinks the beer too fast and her ears ring. She thinks of a particular drawing she has been working on all week, not quite right; she thinks of her father, Min, who video-called her that morning while holding the fat rabbit, whose name she never can remember, with the red eyes, and attempting to give him worming medicine with a syringe. She is thinking about – no, wait, there she is. Eva comes towards her, wending around the tables. Ori prepares her face, trying to remember what they agreed to earlier, the boundaries and edges of the game. Eva is holding two beers and her hair is pushed back from her face and damp around her ears, and her mouth is opening, calling out something that Ori cannot hear until she draws closer. It is Ori's name.

You're here, Ori says, without meaning to, almost giving it away already. The game is this: they are pretending they do not know one another, they are pretending they have never met before and this is the first date.

Yes, Eva says, and laughs, then manoeuvres herself onto the grass in a way that suggests some pain.

Are you OK? Ori says.

Oh yes, Eva says, I've just hurt my back I think, from lifting boxes and not sitting down. It hurts a bit. And my knees. And my feet. Do you mind if

I? She takes off her shoes, reaching forward along the length of her legs and pulling them off at the heel without undoing the laces.

I don't mind, Ori says, and Eva turns and catches her eye, a momentary lapse in character, and then covers her mouth to laugh while Ori shushes her. Shush, shush, shush.

Why have you been lifting boxes? Ori says.

My restaurant has just opened. It was opening night yesterday. It has been so mad all week, all month – well, all year.

That's really exciting, Ori says. Eva shifts to get comfortable, lifting her glass off the ground so she doesn't knock it, and Ori catches the smell of cooked meat on her, fennel, salt. Eva's hands, lifting the glass to her soft mouth, are scratched and cut. Seeing her looking, Eva holds out one hand and turns it so they can both examine the scars and welts, some older, some newer, the bracelet of hot oil spatter along her wrists.

Now you? Eva says.

Ori holds out her hands, palms up. Eva leans over to look at them and then turns them over to search on the back. The nails are hacked and uneven with chips of very old green varnish; the skin soft and babyish and unmarked, the blue veins protuberant, around the knuckles there are ink marks from the printer breaking that morning.

Let me guess what you do, Eva says, and hums a thinking sound. Are you a wood chopper?

You're mocking me.

A little. I know that you're a writer. I googled you.

Well, I googled you too.

We're on even ground then, Eva says. Another?

Yes, Ori says.

Eva comes back with two more beers. A space at one of the long wooden tables opens up and they quickly take it, spilling their pints as they go, holding on to one another, each touch a little *yes, no, yes, no* moment that goes ahead of them, a pretence that these are first touches, new movements. They talk about their days. Ori tells Eva about planning what to say before she got to the bar and then, still, being given the wrong drink. Eva tells her a story about once encountering a nun in an ice cream shop where she used to go with her ex-girlfriend and becoming so thrown by the sight of the woman in her habit that she kept calling her Mother. I'm sorry Mother, as

they nearly collided outside of the toilet. Her real mother took Eva, after the violent and vengeful destruction of her marriage, to South Africa when she was a child. Eva was sent to a convent school and took out all of her wrath on the nuns. Once, she arranged with four of the other wild girls to lift the principal's car, a Mini, across the taut mown grass and nudge it into the acid blue swimming pool, where it bubbled for a moment and then sank.

Tell me another story about South Africa, Ori says.

Eva tells her about the sharks. Near the house there was a beach where she would go after school. There was a shark net protecting the beach, a line of red buoys demarking the boundary. Once she was sitting on the beach when the boats went out to bring in the dead creatures that had become tangled in the nets. She crept closer to the boats and saw the sharks and dolphins heaved off the sides and dropped onto the concrete docks, heard the slap of their fleshy silver bodies breaking open. The sharks were big, tiger sharks and bull sharks and, occasionally, a great white with flabbergasted eyes. It was then that Eva found out – she cannot remember exactly from who – that the sharks had died on the side of the nets closest to the beach; they were swimming away when they became tangled. After that she could not swim and she did not swim, even in the pool. For a long time, she had a weird dream. Ori goes to get them another drink. The bar is very busy and she elbows and shouts her order and comes back with pints and shots in little plastic cups. For a long time, Eva says, she had a weird dream in which there was a net hanging from the sky and covering her house. In the dream there was a moment when the net started to shudder and then move quickly upwards, exposing the house to enormous and immediate danger.

They talk about their past relationships. Ori tells her about crying in a dark hallway with a girl and how, years later, accidentally, they met again in Italy, and took one another into a bedroom filled with coats. Eva takes her hand in anticipation of this story – which is their story – and holds on. It feels so good holding Eva's hand and Ori thinks about Eva in that varnish-stinking hallway, long past bedtime, and then she remembers that in this game they are new to one another, and she tries to erase all previous memories of them together and see only Eva in this moment.

Shall we go? Eva says. She tips back the dregs of her drink and Ori watches the long reveal of her throat, and her hands narrow and torn and perfect like throats themselves.

Let's go, she says.

The small town has three pubs and, on the road below them, a takeaway shop. They stand in the street with their cartons. Eva douses her chips in vinegar and salt and eats the long green pickled chilli with her fingers. Her chin is wet with vinegar. Ori wants them to be known to one another, it is exhausting being strangers. She wants to be the one who drove to pick up Eva from the hospital when she broke her arm. She wants Eva to be reading a draft of a story she is writing; they are in bed in the morning, Eva is bare-chested, wearing her chunky green glasses, murmuring at a sentence she likes, reaching for her cup of coffee.

Do you have any siblings? Ori asks Eva.

No, do you? Eva says.

No, Ori says.

Eva looks at her. Do you want children one day?

Yes, Ori says, when I meet the right person and have been with her for long enough, I think we will have children. What about you?

Yes. That sounds good. That sounds like a good plan. How long is long enough, do you think?

I don't know. Maybe – Ori says.

And Eva says at the same time – maybe eight years.

But the cottage is not ready, Ori says. We need to do so much work on the cottage. And the restaurant has only just opened.

Eva looks at her and gasps and says with a great laugh, you fell out of it.

I absolutely did not, Ori says, who are you and what is your name again?

I saw you looking at me and you loved me far too much.

That's true. We did so well, Ori says.

Yes, Eva says. She kisses Ori and shouts a laugh again. Hello. I love you. How did your first date go?

Extremely well. Ten out of ten.

Five stars, Eva says. I'm glad we're back though. Shall we walk home?

They weave down the route that leads away from the town and to the new cottage where they have only lived for a few months. Again, as they go, they remember the story of the nun in the ice cream shop. Ori remembers both the story as told by Eva the stranger, in the garden of the pub, and the actuality of the event: the mango smoothie melting on her tongue, the blue-tinged bulb in the bathroom crackling, the pain of standing on the pavement

and laughing so hard she thought she might not stop. Mother, they howl into the undergrowth, Mother, Mother, Mother.

I need a wee, Ori says. She dashes off the path and across the scrubby field to the edge, where there are high overgrown trees. She squats beside the thick brush. When she is done she pulls her underwear and trousers back up and runs, exhilarated, to where Eva is tipsily waiting on the path. The darkness, the fidget of bats overhead, the quietness of the lane. Ahead, a playground. They go in through the peeling yellow gate and cavort around, balancing ineptly along the wooden beam, climbing to the top of the slide and then slipping down into the sandpit. Eva heaves herself up on the monkey bars and Ori surges forward and tries to kiss the revealed belly between trousers and shirt, stumbles, knocks her nose against Eva's hip bone.

Shall we go on the swing, Eva says.

Yes.

They take one each, shunting their bottoms back onto the rubber seats. The chains in Ori's hands, her feet scraping the ground until she lifts. Eva is already high, pumping her legs. It takes Ori a moment to get going. And then she is rolling. In the space between the top and the bottom of the swing there is elastic time, slowed to a drip. Her feet brush the trees opposite, her head when she tips it over the apex of her spine scrapes a line from purple sky down into the ground. She is in the ground. She is up in the air, lifting from the seat. The swing dips and rises again and in the seat there is a child, barefooted, tipping backwards, and when the swing emerges once more it is empty, rising of its own accord and then the child is there again, in dungarees and with that particular frowning concentration which brings Eva to mind. The swing, up, up, and down, and up again, and in the swing Ori is the child, going so high she thinks she will tip the top and go right over, screeching her lost mother's name out into the startled day. She drags her feet to slow herself, dizzy. Eva slows too. She finds herself nervous to say it out loud, has to dare herself.

Did you mean it? Ori says. She does not need to tell Eva what she means.

Yes. I did. How about you, are you sure?

Yes, Ori says. She is suddenly so sure that it might already have happened. They are threading their lingering way back through the town to the baby who is sleeping, waiting for them. They are waking in the creeping grey dawn to look down at the sleeping child. The child is on the swing,

tipping to oblivion again. Everything has already happened. Everything is already ecstatic and beyond belief.

At home they drink glasses of whisky and dance loose-legged to Nina Simone around the boxes piled up in the sitting room. Ori closes her eyes. It is possible, behind her eyelids, to hear the slowly familiar sound of the cottage. This home they drew between them. The years of saving and saving, rental flats and shared houses, sheens of mould in the kitchens and the bathrooms, sudden evictions, enormous chunks of the deposits gone when they left. It feels as if, in the playground, on the walk home, they have imagined the child they will have in the same way they imagined their house. When she opens her eyes Eva is lying asleep on the sofa. She pulls a blanket over her, goes into the kitchen and drinks a glass of water and then another, her belly swelling. She cannot sleep. Every part of her is filled with beating awakeness. A baby. They will have a baby. Dear Mother, she says in her head, the way that she used to do when she was a teenager. Dear Stranger Mother, I am thinking of you. We are going to try to have a baby. She looks down at her fingers closed over the edge of the kitchen sink. Dear Mother, Mother, dear, Mother, dear. There is the smell of salt and there is blood on her bare knees, dripping down her calves, and the gusty noise of plastic buffeted around. She goes back into the sitting room and kneels beside Eva's head.

Wake up, Eva, wake up. I need to talk to you.

Oh god, I drank too much. I'm already hungover.

Open your eyes.

They are open.

No, they aren't.

OK. What's wrong?

Ori doesn't know how to say it. Eva sits up and takes her hand.

You're crying. Why are you crying?

Do you think –?

Eva waits. Her waiting face, softened with booze and imprinted with the line of the sofa pillow, is so beloved to Ori that she cries even harder.

You don't want a baby? Eva says.

I do. She is surprised by the certainty. Yes. She does. She does want a baby. She wants a baby with Eva. She wants to push the pram along the back lane the way she has seen other people doing, she wants to hold the

tiny body and be filled with wonder at its existence, she wants – she doesn't even know.

What if my mother, my family, left me on purpose on that island. What if she took me there and left me? And what if what made them leave me is inside of me. Do you think? Do you think that I will be a bad mother?

I know that isn't true. I don't think that at all.

She has cut her mouth on something sharp. She can taste iron. When she was a child she would scoop the coins from the glove compartment of Min's camper and fill her cheeks with them, suck until her tongue tingled. There is the swoosh of some fast and devastating wind above their heads, somehow trapped in the cottage with them. When she was a teenager she would get out the coffee-stained road map and open it at random and put her thumb down hard and press: *there they are, no, there they are, there they are.*

Where are you? Eva says. Listen to me. I love you. You are going to be such a good mum.

Why are you crying now? Ori says, laughing.

I'm excited. You're going to be such a good mum. I'm so tired though. Me too.

They go upstairs. There are still stacks of boxes in the low eaves of their bedroom and the wallpaper is rough and peeling and needs replacing. The small room opposite has her desk against one wall and the chipboard she uses to plan balanced in the corner; but maybe, well, there the cot and there maybe a little bookcase and what colours? They are peeling off their clothes and dropping them and brushing their teeth, side by side, moving aside to allow the other to spit; they are saying baby names to one another and filling their hands to wash their faces. In the bed there is a moment when maybe they will have sex, a tired grappling, and then Eva is asleep. Ori lies awake only a little longer, thinking about the baby.

Ori

She is taken to the hospital for an induction. For nearly two days she hears the baby's heartbeat coming from the machines. It is steady and beautiful. On the second day the baby's heartbeat starts slowing and Ori is taken into surgery quickly. When the baby is born he brings with him into the room a deafening swallowing silence. The white walls, the masked faces. The little form lifted up.

He is purple and silent and it is both the best day and the worst day that has ever existed and he is brought around and put onto her chest making small sounds, breathing, his face against hers and she and Eva are both crying. They sit looking at him and telling one another that he is their baby. His heart beating beating beating.

Eva is not allowed to stay. Ori and the baby have a space between blue curtains in a room with other women and their babies. There is the tiredness of being awake for three days, through the induction and the labour and the birth, and the tiredness, now, of the baby wanting only to be held and crying whenever she tries to put him down. The tiredness is like a suffocating, papery snow. The midwife comes in and helps her to latch, pressing the baby's little head forward onto the nipple and, when he will not take it, she expresses the creamy yellow colostrum from Ori's breasts into a syringe. She is an angel in her pale pink scrubs, the smell of the food she ate on her break in her hair.

Ori is home now. She is at the cottage with Eva and the baby. All night she holds his little adored body and wishes he would let her put him down. Sometimes she manages to lever him into the Moses basket and lift her arms free, and sometimes, even, she can lie down for a second before he

wakes, startled, and cries and cries and cries as if she has abandoned him. She picks him up, she holds him against her chest. The room is red-lit from the nightlight and it smells of the bedsheet, which is damp with milk and blood and baby sick. The noises of the hospital appear around her and fill the whole space. There is the beeping of the machines that goes on all night and the crying of the other babies behind the blue curtains, there is the rattle of the trolley on the linoleum. She feels the tug of the catheter and the sharp ache of the new incision. I am in my bedroom, she says to herself sternly, I am not at the hospital anymore. Eva sleeps on the sofa below them so she will not be tired for work and slip and cut herself or someone else with one of the sharp knives. Ori holds him in the gloaming. Morning is sharp as the knives that Ori somehow cannot stop thinking about. Eva should not be tired in case she cuts herself with the sharp knives. But what about Ori? What about Ori with the knives and the baby? Ori thinks about the knives as she holds the baby and palpates his legs to help release gas from his rounded belly. She is so tired; what if she slips and cuts herself on this sharp child, this new knife that has just entered her life?

Eva says she will drop them off on the way to work. We need to hurry otherwise I'm going to be late, Eva says. She holds the baby in the doorway while Ori runs around trying to find everything she will need. Her brain isn't working properly, she keeps forgetting what she's already packed.

Ori, please, Eva calls out.

Yes, sorry, I just need the – I just need the –

The word has torn loose and floated away. She wrenches around, trying to find the, what is it, yes, the wet wipes, the change of clothes, the mustard-coloured cream that goes on his red bottom.

I'm ready, Ori says. Except once he's in the car she smells it on him.

Didn't you smell this? Ori says. I need to change him.

I'm late, Eva says. I wasn't thinking about nappies, I was thinking about risotto.

OK, Ori says, thinking about knives. Yes. That makes sense you were thinking about risotto. I need to change him before we go.

She gets him out of his seat. He's pissed off with her faffing.

Do you want us to get the bus? Ori says.

She can see on Eva's face that she does but she says, no. I know you won't go if I don't take you.

I will, Ori says, although she knows she won't. It's been weeks since she went further than the garden; some days when the crying gets too much she goes and sits in the car and some days she doesn't even open the front door. I go to the hospital, she thinks, although this is not exactly true, the hospital comes to her, swift, surrounding them.

It's fine, Eva says. Come on.

Ori changes him in the boot, which he doesn't like. He doesn't like the cold on his skin and the wet when he wees and he doesn't like her. He hates her. She is close to crying but she will not cry because Eva will be later then, even, than she is now and all day she will send Ori her little pep messages. *You're doing so well! You're nearly there! I can't believe what a brilliant mum you are! I miss you both and wish I was with you!*

I just need to – she says.

Ori, Eva cries after her as she runs back to the house.

She doesn't know what she has come inside for. Something. She goes back out.

Why do you have that? Eva says.

She is holding the metal sick bowl that they had given her at the hospital and which she stole when they left.

I need it, she says, and knows that Eva will not question her, will suppose that the bowl is for some mysterious child-rearing purpose that she is too busy thinking about risotto to understand.

Eva drops them at the corner and Ori drags out the pram, the bag, the metal bowl, their coats from the boot, and then hustles round to get out the baby who hates, more than anything, the car, and is trembling with despair. The hall has a steepled roof. From outside she can hear the noises of calling children and she is afraid to go in. What exactly is she afraid of? The baby in her arms is howling now and maybe he is hungry, she had thought she would know, but she is not certain. She tries to get through the glass doors with the buggy and the bag and the baby screaming and it is not possible, so she leaves the buggy in the car park and goes into the hallway. She can see children and adults moving in the large room further down but he is crying so much and if she goes in with him like this they will think that she has hurt him. She sits on the floor in the hallway and tries to feed him. He wrenches around as if the act horrifies him and she tries again and again, using the different positions that the midwife showed her, and she cries and

then finally he feeds and sleeps in exhaustion. She sits and holds him. Even as he is sleeping his mouth moves, drinking from her, and she has the enormous sense that he is drinking all of her. He is pouring her into himself. She does not want him to take her.

The baby wakes and she goes into the large room. There are green plastic tunnels and trays of sand. A small boy dressed as a princess runs up to her and peers at the baby and then runs away again. She sits on a tiny red chair, holding the baby. There are other women there, speaking to one another, calling out. She looks at them carefully for signs of hurt or panic but their faces are smooth, their hands move gently. She cannot help staring at them. Their tangled limbs, their opening and shutting mouths, their feet set on the floor and then pushing up to lift a crying toddler or lower a baby into a bouncy chair. Maybe she can copy their ease, their lack of fear. She observes how to get a cup of coffee and then goes to the open hatch in the wall and gets a cup and drinks it, black, very hot. The baby shifts and then howls and when she looks down, the edge of the hot cup has grazed his arm and he is screaming. She turns back, looking for somewhere to sit. Everyone in the room is staring at her. The adults in their chairs are twisted towards her, the toddlers have stilled on their little bikes and trampolines. Their clothes have changed too. The women are wearing the blue gowns from the hospital and there is the flashing of warning red lights. The baby's heartbeat has dropped and they need to take her for surgery. When they pull back the blanket covering her numb, immovable legs there is a froth of blood. Someone has come over and is standing very close. It is the midwife in the pink uniform, her face bleached out, her mouth moving. She is saying something. She is saying something that Ori needs to hear but she cannot make out the words.

Her father, Min, is coming to get them in his old red car. She stands in the drizzle, holding the sleeping baby against her chest, and waits for him. When he pulls up into the car park, she can hear Eva's voice through the open window, coming out of his phone speaker, and she feels such an enormous wave of shame at this failure.

I'm here now, Eva, I'll call you when we get back.

He gets out and comes to her and takes the baby. Without his weight there seems to be nothing holding her arms down and they float up into the sky. Her father is strapping the small baby into the car, in a moment he will

come back to her. She will tell him. She will tell him how the hospital reoccurs and how sometimes when this happens she thinks of leaving the baby and walking away and she will tell him about Eva's knives, which she has longed for all day because of the great damage they could do and she will tell him how she wakes in those small moments of sleeping and is devastated by the guilt of these thoughts which come into her like still more knives, sharpened, at all other times kept in their fabric sheaths to avoid being blunted. Her father is coming up towards her and, carefully, taking her elbow to lead her to the car. She opens her mouth to tell him everything but she cannot find the right words.

She sits in the back of the car. Looking over the sleeping baby out of the window, she realises that her father is driving them not towards the cottage but to his own house. It is the small, white house set on the flat fens with the river at the foot of the garden, the house where she grew up after they stopped living in the camper van. He is speaking quietly to her from the front seat. Occasionally his eyes meet hers in the rear-view mirror. He is telling her that they are going to come live with him for a while, so he can help out and she can sleep, she must be so tired, everything that she is feeling is only tiredness. She looks out of the window. They are driving along a road that follows the length of the narrow river – which further inland is called the River Dash but here is colloquially mostly called the quick river – which often floods the fields near Min's house. As a child, after they stopped travelling and Min came here to work at the city university on the edge of the marshland, she would often walk down to the river and spend hours in the shallows, until her feet went numb. Sometimes she would stand in the river and imagine it passing across the country, through the small towns and larger cities it intersected, and coming, eventually, to the sea and in the sea the water from the river would perhaps pass to the island itself, the island where she had been found. She closes her eyes and leans her head against the damp window and dreams of the river's waters passing across her frozen feet, around her ankles, and she dreams of being dragged beneath the surface and carried in meandering ways out to the coast, out to the coast and to the island and on the island is everything and nothing and it is possible to live there, away from the hospital, away from the baby.

At the house her father says, shall we go feed the rabbits?

They go out to the run. It is a wide metal-fenced enclosure that she and Eva helped to build, digging the fence down into the ground to stop the foxes from getting in. The enclosure looks, she has always thought, more like a monkey pen than somewhere rabbits would live; there are wooden ramps and rubber tyres, swinging balls and an area of overgrown grass. There are three hutches with rises up to the doorways. In cold winters her father moves the hutches into the shed but most of the year the rabbits are outside. She is never entirely sure how many rabbits her father has; every visit there are fewer or more than the time before. The baby is in a puffy coat, his eyes trying to follow birds, the branches of moving trees. They clean out the hutches of old sawdust and droppings, scrape out the muck and replace it with new sawdust and hay. She changes the water in the bottles attached to the metal fence and listens to her father discussing the baby with the rabbits that cluster around him, climb up onto his slippers, pressing their flat wriggling faces into his outstretched palms.

This is my grandson, you met him before actually. What do you think? He's quite the best baby isn't he. Be careful, don't pile in at once.

He shrugs at Ori, clears his throat. She wants to ask him, the way she did over and over when she was a child, about how he found her. Tell me again, she would say, and with the utmost patience he would begin the story once more. The island, the spring, the hare that was actually a girl. He is lifting the baby's hand to help him stroke one of the rabbits. She is overwhelmed by his being there with her, always, by his finding her, by his keeping her, by his bringing her and the baby here to the house and looking after them. He is her family. She does not need any other family.

It is late by the time Eva gets back from the restaurant. Ori does not hear her coming in. The baby's mouth is a cave but he will not feed. She holds him in one arm and tries to look for help on the internet with the other. *The best breastfeeding positions for gas, how much is too much crying, what to do if you are so tired, ways to stop a baby crying.* Exhaustion finally comes over him. She is so delirious that he is asleep at last that she bends her head away from him and opens her mouth in a silent roar of triumph. One of his hands is clinging on to the edge of her dressing gown, he is so small and once he was inside her. She sways and sways and sways but she is so tired that she will certainly fall asleep standing up and then drop him. She sways and sways and sways and then cradles him quickly forward, holding him for

a moment and then letting him loose into his Moses basket. He sleeps. She lies down. She sleeps for a moment (and dreams of the hospital, and dreams of the hospital), long enough to think that it might be an hour, maybe, at least, or half an hour anyway, but then he starts to scream and it has only been ten minutes. She gets up and finds herself shouting GO TO SLEEP GO TO SLEEP I HATE YOU GO TO SLEEP. When she looks up Eva has come into the room.

It is later. Ori has lost time. The baby is howling and howling and when she looks down he is in her arms. His face is crusty with dried snot and her nipples are pulsing with pain. When she lifts her top there is blood on one, from his mouth or from her skin, broken open. Ori jigs the baby, sometimes jiggling him so fast that his crying turns into a little wa-wa-wa like a train passing through a tunnel. She cuts moons into her palms with her nails and turns the white noise up high, feeds and feeds and feeds him for hours until finally he sleeps. Oh he sleeps. His lovely face crumpled to oblivion. She moves so slowly that decades must pass and she gets herself out of the room and stands in the still hallway with her back against the wall.

There is someone just outside the door. Who is it? A figure made of shadows and flashing nightlights and moon-off-snow. A hare stood on its back legs like a woman, baring the cage of its mouth at her. It is her mother. Ghost-thing, dead-thing, running-thing, leaving her in the cold. It is her son, grown larger than life and come back for revenge. No, it is just Eva, rising anxiously from the floor, reaching out to her. She is whispering something, moving closer, her mouth moving closer to Ori's ear.

I love you, she is saying. I love you, I love you.

Ori does not care about Eva's love anymore, she only cares about not, every minute, hurting the baby. I love you, Eva says. In the bedroom the baby starts to cry again, desperately. Eva stops talking. Ori looks at Eva and they wait. Ori is waiting for Eva to go into the room but the baby cries and Eva stands, uncertainly, waiting too. Eva has arms and Ori's arms are so tired, Eva has such long arms and she has used them to love Ori and now she can use them to take this fucking, fucking baby. Ori feels an expression come upon her that she is not in control of, her lips bulging and lifting away from her grinding teeth, her fists clenching. It is such a frightening anger that she thinks she will not be able to hold it. She feels it come from the aching ground and up through the roots and ribs of the house and into her. She comes at Eva, striking her across the chest with her flattened hands,

going for her eyes, and Eva is crying out and falling back, raising her palms to ward Ori off. Eva curled, staring at her. Ori above her, craning down, about to harm her again, if she can.

Do you want me to go? Eva says.

Ori waits for her to explain. Why would she want her to go? She wants her to stay, she wants her to come inside the awful cave room with her, she wants Eva to help her.

If having me here is making everything worse then I can go to the cottage. If you want me to I will go and I will wait for you to tell me to come back.

Ori tries to speak but cannot. Eva is looking at her. Ori turns and goes into the room and picks up the baby. The bedroom is a cave at the bottom of a long well. Eva is listening at the door to check that she is not hurting the baby. Ori waits for her to come in but she does not. Eva is the wolf at the door. No. Ori is the wolf at the door, she has got through the door, she is the wolf inside the room, standing over the baby's bed.

what is that story about the king who tells the two women that they can tear the baby in half to keep him

she will tear the baby in half to keep him
she will.

Her father goes to work at the university and she and the baby stay at the house. She holds her phone and thinks of messaging Eva but does not. She is hungry. She has the baby in the sling and she moves carefully to avoid waking him. She searches in the cupboards, eats a stale biscuit, throws away mouldy bread. She thinks that maybe she will walk down the garden and to the river path. He is sleeping. She is capable of anything. The C-section scar pulls taut and aches as she plaits her hair, manages to get on her shoes, pressing the heels of the shoes until they break, pushing one arm into her coat sleeve. He stirs against her, tenses. She feels him shitting, his stomach clenching, waking himself.

A loud knocking. Her mother is calling to her. Is that a memory? The lighthouse is on fire or, no, the thorns are burning around it, embracing it. No, it is the front door. It is the health visitor. Ori recognises her voice. She has heavy bags, a big smile. Ori is suspicious of her unharmed body, her

tights sagging around the ankles, her girlish plait. She changes the baby's nappy on the floor while the health visitor, whose name she remembers now is Rachel, speaks to her from the sofa.

How are you? Rachel says.

Ori doesn't know how to answer this. Rachel nods to the baby. What a pickle, what a lovely little pickle. All I'm going to do is ask you some questions and then tell you the scale and you can nod when I get to the point which describes you. Does that sound OK? Here we go.

There are a large number of questions. Ori feels certain of her answers and that she is answering correctly, in the way she should be, but as she goes on, she becomes less sure. Yes, she is happy, yes, she is looking forward with enjoyment to – yes she is anxious or worried for no good reason, yes most of the time she is so unhappy that she cries, yes quite often the thought of harming herself has occurred to – yes most of the time she hasn't been able to cope at all and things have been getting on top of her and yes she is unable to find the words which she once had and yes she cannot write although she is a writer and yes she is inhabited by nothing by emptiness by silence and yes she is losing more every day and yes she loves him and yes if she could take the language he will one day have and give it to herself she would do it, yes, in a second, yes, in a heartbeat.

Ori

One morning about a week after they first arrive her father says: I need to show you something. His voice is loud and his white hair is very rumpled. All week he has been rushing around, leaving and then returning to the house with plastic boxes of equipment. She has heard him in the night, tapping at the computer keys in the study at the top of the house, walking backwards and forward over her head. Something is happening. Something is happening with the hares. She lifts the baby out of his high chair and they follow Min upstairs to his study. It is a lot messier than when she was last here, perhaps messier than she has ever seen it: abandoned coffee cups, stacks of paper and books. Her father takes her by the shoulders and pushes her into the chair in front of the computer.

Look, he says. Do you remember I showed you these?

He gets up the same 3D images that he showed her years ago. This is the brain of one of the ten hares that I've been following for a long time. Hares do not have burrows underground, as you know. This image is from when the hare is awake and moving across the fields, taking the route to visit its young. Now, this image here is from when the hare is asleep. You can see that, as I found years and years ago, the same neurons become active when the hare is asleep as do when it is awake: the hare is dreaming about the routes that it takes to see its young. Anyway. This is new. Look. Ori, look.

She opens her eyes. She had not realised she shut them. He has got up a different image.

Here, he says. This is the image of a baby hare's brain. The baby can't be older than a week, maybe less. For the first time we managed to put electrodes on the leverets so we can observe what parts of their brains are activated when they sleep.

He does something and the image is overlaid by another, like tracing paper.

This is the image from before, of the mother's brain. I can't believe it. It must be a mistake, but the parts of the baby's brain which are lighting up are the same parts as the mother's. The mother is dreaming of the route to the baby and the baby is experiencing neural mimicry. Somehow, they are dreaming of the same map without ever leaving their forms.

She shakes her head. Her father is still talking. She looks at the image on the screen. The baby starts crying and she gets up, legs aching, to jig him. She looks at the baby's face and his tiny hands. There is no connection between us, she thinks. When I dream it is not a map of how to find you.

Later there is a break in the rain and her father suggests they take the baby for a walk down to the river. She wears the baby in the sling and they go out the front door of the house and round to the fields, along the well-tramped footpaths, over the little bridge made from wooden planks her father put down a long time ago, down to the river. It has been raining for days and the river is high at its banks and speedy along its course. She eyes the greenish rush of it, the fast brown snake, and tries to listen to what her father is saying.

I did something for you, he says. He takes his phone from his pocket and waves it at her. Hold on. He presses and manipulates the screen. They stand in the damp high grass beside the river. Four steps and she could walk into it and away. She imagines the supreme slide of it vanishing beneath her feet. It takes her breath away with the thought of how wonderful it would be. Her father is holding up the phone towards her now. On the screen an audio file is playing. A series of sounds are coming out of the phone, whirrs and clicks and long notes, sometimes higher and sometimes lower in tone, with an underlying beep that goes on and on.

I thought that you found it difficult to look at it on a screen before, so I've made it into audio. This is the mapping of the neurons firing as the adult hare travels in her dreams. And this – he moves his hand on the screen and the sound stops and another starts instead – this is the baby dreaming.

The sounds are different, more frantic, in a different order, but underneath it all there is the same beep, moving rhythmically forward. The beeping swells around her and seems to fill the space between her and the river. It surrounds her. Her father has walked on further down the path, not seeming to notice that she is not following him. She looks at the water of the river

and she thinks of walking in. She will cut down into the river and drop them under the surface and it will be over then, thank goodness, it will be done.

When she was fourteen, she began really looking for whoever had been her family before Min. She had shingles, ugly pustules under her armpit, and was off school for nearly two weeks. That year Min was flying back and forth from South Africa, helping out with a study on Cape hares, and he employed one of his PhD students to drop in, make her food, feed the geese staying in the field beyond the house for the summer. The student's name was Doob and he was awkward and slow-talking. He made her shepherd's pie and they watched old episodes of *Grand Designs* together. He was bullied by the geese, came in with bloodied hands, looking for plasters. When she admitted to him how bored she was he showed her how to play solitaire. One late night, itchy and unable to sleep, she looked up the island on the computer. There were fuzzy photos and maps, descriptions of the hare population written by Min, information about boat rentals. She stayed up until morning. Doob came to feed the geese and bring her strudel in a tin, his family recipe. She was very tired and found it difficult to speak to him. *Dear Mother*, she wrote in the corner of her maths exercise book, *I am looking for you this week. I am going to find you.* After Doob left for the day she wrote down directions for the coast and took all of the money Min had left her for food and emergencies. She stood at the bus stop and waited. She changed buses three times and then got off. She walked past many houses. She was hungry, hadn't thought to bring any food, and when she reached into her pocket the money was gone, lost, dropped somewhere, taken. By the time she reached the beach of the small town the sky was purple. She lingered, waiting to get the courage to speak to someone. When a woman pushing a buggy walked past Ori called out to her. The woman stopped, stared. I want, Ori said, I need, to get to the island. Can I get to the island? The woman shook her head, already moving away. She tried to find someone else to take her but no one would. The island was dangerous, they said.

Doob came to collect her. They drove home. The geese had somehow got into the house, Doob had left the door open in his haste, and they were climbing up and down the stairs, honking after one another through the rooms. Ori stood stunned while Doob clapped and yelled in German, chased them back outside.

Don't tell him, she begged Doob when he came back inside, kicking off his goose-shit-covered shoes. Please, don't tell him.

It felt like such a betrayal, as if there needed to be anything more than what there was. *But where are you? And who are you? And why have you left me?* For years and years she dreamed of the island thief that had stolen her family, overrun with hares, the cliff crumbling and crumbling away into the hungry sea.

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Part Five

THE KNOCKING GAME

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Ruth

Ruth is late for work again. Three buses go past, full, and she has to run up the steep hill and down through the underpass. The industrial estate has four roads of warehouses, car repair garages mostly, a couple of cleaning businesses and carpet shops. There's a food truck there in the morning, selling egg sandwiches, bacon butties, oily coffee. Beyond there is a scrub of wasteland, covered with saplings and murky stagnant rainwater in the cracked concrete. The warehouse for BOUNCE INC is right at the back, wedged into one corner, so big it looks like an aircraft hangar. There is a boom-thud-click shaking the metal walls. She puts her shoes and bag into one of the staff lockers, goes into the bathroom to change into the purple shirt with the logo, the special socks. The bathroom smells like kid sick and cheesy Wotsits. A woman is standing by one of the cubicles holding the door closed and shouting instructions inside. Just, wipe now. Are you listening? Just wipe it. A kid inside is crying and trying to get the door open.

The manager is hanging about near the entrance to the floor and he shrugs at her, arms crossed, jerks his chin towards the bouncy castle. It's her first week and she's been late every day. The warehouse is divided roughly into three sections. In the first, almost all of the space is taken up by many square trampolines set into the floor, connected by rubber matting; there's a couple of basketball hoops and a place where the walls are trampolines too, going up the height of three people or more. In one corner there is a larger trampoline with built-up, soft sides, beneath a high concrete platform reached by stairs. There's a birthday party of teenagers taking turns dropping from the platform onto the trampoline below. They drop silently, land and roll, and walk back to do it again. The third section of the hall, sunk into the ground, is taken up by the bouncy castle. The warehouse sounds like a swimming pool, the echoes of shouts. There are balloons trapped in the domed metal ceiling, slowly deflating. When she touches the

edge of the slide that leads into the bouncy castle it is sticky with spilled slushie. She looks in from above. There is a mess of people rushing around and screaming, bouncing off one another and the walls. There are more slides below and a basin filled with rubber tubing topped with monkey bars. There are shadowed entrances in and out of the rubber sides – tunnels, leading to the guts of the castle. There is a crush of toddlers at the top of one of the smaller slides, others climbing up from the base. She can hear someone screaming from somewhere out of sight, the noise billowing out of the tunnel. There is the wheeze-puff of the air pumped into the inflatable and the crack of the trampolines behind her; the stink of socked feet, sweat, old rubber. She slides into the mess. Some adults who might be parents are gathered to one side, leaning and swaying in the turbulence, chatting or watching a man in a tight t-shirt who is pulling himself across a series of bars and hanging punching bags. Beneath him a toddler is screaming Daddy, Daddy, Daddy and trying to extricate herself from the rubber tubing, panicked, reaching her arms up to the man who lets go of the bar with one hand and hangs from the other, not seeming to hear her. The adults call out encouragement or ignore him.

A kid comes fast down the slide and collides with another climbing up. Both of them lie tangled and sobbing at the bottom. There's the gasp of rushing air from the tunnels, the noise of shouting and screaming. When she goes inside there is the smell of mildew, the walls and floors damp with handprints, brown tape holding together some of the corners. She picks up the pace, running forward, stumbling on the rubbery floor which rebounds beneath her falling knees. Around the corner there is an open space with large inflatable peaks. A mess of adolescent boys in cut-offs and close haircuts have got the toddler from the rubber tubing pit and are throwing her and bouncing her off the walls and the inflated humps, catching her, scooping her up, throwing her again. Ruth does not know how she got there. The muscled man she saw climbing across the pit, one-handed, is nowhere. The toddler's scream has the tone of hysteria and Ruth is uncertain whether she is enjoying the game, until she spins mid-air and Ruth sees her face, her teeth gritted together, her eyes flickering fast from side to side like she is watching quick trains passing through a window. Her scream is fear-filled, there is the flash of her white underwear as her pinafore dress flips up, her knees clamped tightly. Ruth shouts, put her down, put her down. The kids nearest turn, clocking her, but don't pause in

what they're doing. She reaches forward and one checks her with his hip, stopping her getting through, almost like an accident. Across the circle one of the boys is looking at her, frowning. His grey t-shirt is stuck to his chest with sweat and his skin is feverish, blotches of red on his cheeks, his lower lip heavy and damp.

Watch out, he calls to her.

Put her down, Ruth shouts. Put her down right now.

What are you talking about? the boy says. He is fourteen, perhaps younger, his bare feet splayed to hold his balance.

Just put her down, OK, Ruth says, trying to get forward. The flying toddler has gone silent. The kids nearest Ruth close ranks, she thumps at them. There is a thud in her ears. She drops to her knees, pain from the stitches, and tries to crawl towards the girl. The boy opposite is laughing. Someone heaves her up from behind and then shoves the nearest kid so he goes flying, losing his balance and taking out one of the others, a tangle of flailing limbs. It's a woman in a purple staff t-shirt and a long plait who Ruth has not met before. She moves lightly on the air-filled floor, using her weight to propel herself, pushing another of the kids who is coming towards her, and who goes down. Her back is very straight, she moves in towards them.

Who do you think – the boy starts to say, gaping at his fallen friends.

Put her down or I'll break your nose, she says, and then claps her hands together and says, crack. The boy stiffens, stares.

Get the kid, she says to Ruth. The girl is on the floor where she has fallen, curled over, eyes open. Ruth scoops her up.

You're all banned, the woman says. Get the fuck out. I'll wait. Off you go.

Come on, the woman says when they've got the toddler back to her father, who is stiff with the potential for blame. Ruth follows her off the trampoline floor and up the stairs to the café. The woman bends over the huffing freezer and digs out two Magnums. They sit up on the sticky tables where they can see down to the floor. The woman unwraps her Magnum, cracks it between her teeth.

Little shits, she says. Ruth is still damp, her arms aching and tingling as the panic leaves her. She catches, like the tail of a kite, the memory of the

small girl thrown into the air and she cups her hands over her mouth. The woman turns to look at her, holding the Magnum stick between two fingers.

Oh, are you alright? she says, and then takes Ruth's still-packaged ice cream and holds it against her hot head, turning it gently to and fro on the skin. You've got a child, hey?

How did you know?

The woman opens the Magnum, hands it over. The chocolate breaks, a rush of sugar.

Last year a boy broke his leg on the trampoline over there. You see it? He thought he was tough shit. He was, like, flipping up and bouncing off and turning over and I could see him on the camera so I went up because I thought he was going to break his neck, he wasn't keeping his head tucked in at all. I called out to him and I must have distracted him because he came down on the side at a weird angle. I heard it. It was the bone here. She reaches down and touches Ruth's calf. Called the tibula or something. I heard the noise in my chest and I thought it was my girl. Like I saw it being her. The look on her face of surprise and pain. He screamed so loudly. That night at home I kept seeing her breaking her leg. She's only little but she was jumping and bouncing and I distracted her. I couldn't see straight at work for a week. Every stupid kid coming backwards down the slide or flipping over on the basketball trampoline was her. I was never scared before I had her and her brother. I could watch any horror film, go on any ride. Now I'm scared all of the time.

Yeah, Ruth says, because she can't think how else to answer and because she is still shaking a little.

How old's your kid?

Two months.

The woman taps the Magnum stick against her back teeth. Mine are six and nearly two. I have to tell you, my new friend, whatever anyone says, it does not get easier.

Her name is Jupjaapun but she tells Ruth to call her JP. All the rest of the day Ruth observes her in the corner of her vision, tacking across the floor, stopping to talk to someone, her voice coming over the intercom to announce the end of a session or someone's lost wallet.

When she finishes and goes outside Dylan is waiting, holding Ori, who is screaming, ruby with fury, her hands balled.

What are you doing here?

I fed her and um she doesn't need a nappy change and I don't think she's tired but I don't know.

Did you walk here? It's three miles.

We waited for the bus but there wasn't any space for the buggy on any of them. I think she might be in pain but I don't know.

Ruth takes her. Ori stiffens and then drops out of consciousness on her shoulder, the sound of her small sobby snores.

She needed you, Dylan says.

OK, Ruth says. She hurts all over, her skin feels pummelled, shocked, her mouth is very dry. She feels like she has been running without stopping for a year. Ori's weight is nothing, two sacks of flour, but as they go, she gets heavier and heavier until Ruth feels as if the bones on her chest will cave beneath the heft. Still, it is a gentle relief to have Dylan walking beside her, his feet slapping on the floor, the buggy jangling along in front of him. She listens to his urgent monologue about the day. She thinks that maybe he will come up to the flat and they can sit and watch something while the baby sleeps or try to figure out dinner, but as they get closer, he says: I have to go.

Why?

I'm stacking shelves. Remember. Georgio got me the job and I'm going to be late.

Oh, yeah.

Upstairs Georgio is on the sofa in his underwear again, playing a shooter game. The heating is turned up so high that the air seems to crackle. They are staying there as a favour, Georgio knows Dylan's brother Stevie a little, they are getting the room for cheap until he can find someone else to move in. The noise of the staticky machine guns wakes up the baby and Georgio turns to stare while the baby cries and Ruth holds her and attempts to fold the buggy up one-handed.

What's wrong with her? he says.

I'm not sure, Ruth says, and goes into their bedroom. The sheet in the cot is sticky with baby sick, half pulled off the mattress. She lies down on the bed with the baby and then gets up again to make a bottle in the kitchen. There's the stink of burnt tomato sauce and a scum of spaghetti hoops across the dirty hob, swilled underneath the microwave. She shakes the bottle, tests it, goes back into the room. Ruth lies down with Ori and feeds

her, holding the bottle, her small throat contracting as she drinks, her shadowy eyelids drooping. There is some tight spiral of exhaustion that comes monsterring over Ruth and deafens out all the sound from the rest of the apartment block. She can hear only the click-click noise of the baby swallowing and the shudder of her own breath.

Dylan gets home at dawn. The bedroom has no windows and exists in no time, like a black hole. Ruth is sat up in the bed holding the baby. Dylan smells like Doritos and vinegar. He stumbles in, bleary, kicks off his shoes, doesn't even seem to see her, only drops onto the bed.

Actually, she says, could you take her for a bit so I can just brush my teeth?

He doesn't hear her. She considers trying to wake him but he is asleep so heavily she doesn't think it would work. His arms are flung above his head, Superman style, and his hair is vast and bushy. The baby's breath and Dylan's breath echo around and around her. Sometimes they are twinned and the noise is almost tidal, sweeping in and out, and at other times they separate. She listens to the breath to keep herself awake. The baby is a warm creature against her chest. Her scalp is crackly with peeling skin, her black hair is thin and fluffy and worn into a round bald spot at the back. Ruth can see the pulse in the soft part of skin right at the top of her skull and this immediacy of aliveness, the closeness of her thrumming heart, is almost unbearable. The tiredness is jagged and holding her is like dropping very fast through empty space and the promises in her mind are splinters, without the brace of sentences, a murmur of: *I will not, my mother, not like, care for, hold on to, won't do, I will, my mother, I will*. And the holding is pocked with moments when her chin drops forward onto her chest and in that instant she rears back and searches furiously for the locked door of her bedroom, the nails held between her mother's teeth and then hammered down into the windowsill.

Later Dylan snuffles and wakes and stumbles up to make them instant coffee from the hot tap; they sit side by side in bed slugging it down. She can smell the ferrous stink of his teeth and her own stench of unwashed pyjamas and the baby's soft, shitty, milky skin and the smell of the takeaway downstairs, the hot oil. He tells her a faltering story about working in the supermarket, unloading the slabs of beer cans from the rattly trolleys and shoving them deep into the backs of the shelves and clearing up

a swill of smashed gherkin jars from aisle five with a mop, picking up the larger shards of glass in his hands. One of the managers came and handed him a stack of objects. He didn't know what they were. They were green and plastic and quite heavy. Had he been told what they were for? He felt sick with not knowing and not knowing how to ask. He wandered around holding them in his arms and trying to think harder and look purposeful at the same time. He kept thinking about Marvin. The beers maybe had reminded him. He kept wondering where Marvin was and what he was doing.

Ruth knows that Dylan is asking her, in a way he never has, if she slept with Marvin and got pregnant and had a baby made from him. He is asking her in such a tentative way that she feels so sorry and doesn't know what to do, she does not want to talk to him about Marvin.

I'm tired, she says, I hate this flat. Can you tell me again about the island. What was the first time you went like?

I don't know, Dylan says. She can tell from his voice that he is bored of talking to her about the island but she cannot make herself stop.

Did you swim?

Yes. Well, they threw me in. It was cold.

It was cold?

Really cold.

What else?

Like what?

Like anything.

He rolls his head on the wall behind and hangs his empty coffee cup from one finger.

I was really drunk actually. I was ten, or something, but they kept giving me beer and vodka, they thought it was funny. I was so drunk that at one point I thought the sky was the sea. I was lying on my back but I thought I was standing up. So dumb. There were birds in the sky, little black spikes, and I thought they were fish and I was looking down.

What did you do?

I don't remember. I threw up in the sea. The real sea. It was so cold there. Even in the summer, every time we went it was cold. And I fell and cut my hands on the cliff and got blood on the stone. Oh yeah and there was a lighthouse. I forgot. There was a lighthouse at the top of a cliff. We made a fire and drank beer there. It was all ruined and grubby. I didn't like it there.

I think it sounds wonderful, she says.

Why are you so obsessed with it? He sounds annoyed, not meeting her eye.

Like, because, no one would be able to find us there, and we could live any way we wanted. We could grow our own vegetables and no one would tell us what to do. I don't want the baby to grow up somewhere like we did, I want to make something different, you know?

I guess.

They don't say anything for a bit. The baby wakes up and Dylan changes her nappy, concentrating hard, unfolding the little tabs with his trembling thumbs and sticking them down.

What were the things at the supermarket?

Oh, they were containers. You had to put your foot in the middle and then, like, click up the sides to open them. They were for putting stuff in.

The next week their flatmate gets sick and leaves mounds of snotty tissues everywhere, and then Dylan catches whatever it is and won't get out of bed. She makes him a Lemsip hopefully and he slurps it and coughs and coughs. She stands beside the bed and holds the baby.

Shall I take the day off? she says.

He is already asleep.

After three days the manager rings, they're short-staffed, she shouldn't use all her sick days in a row like that, he needs her to come in, yeah, he's sorry but they're in a bind. Dylan blows his nose and props himself up in bed and says they'll be fine. She makes the baby a bottle and Dylan a coffee. The day has a grey sheen to it, the sky is bleached out. She's halfway down the street when she hears her name and turns. Dylan is on the pavement in his dressing gown, wielding the baby before him, both of them weeping.

I feel so shit, he says, I can't. I just feel so shit. Really bad. Give me one more day.

She goes back to him and takes the baby and he flees. He has left her the sling. She puts the baby down on the ground and puts on the sling, fits her inside. Ori calms, snoozes. They get on the bus. She is dank with fear. She gets off the bus a stop earlier and arranges the baby so her head is low and she can do up her jumper over the top of the sling, hiding some of the baby from view. The baby is a chunky lump protruding from her. She dithers

outside and then goes in, beelining past reception, dumping her shoes in front of one of the staff lockers, making it to the trampoline floor. Ruth hides out in the tunnels in the bouncy castle with the baby, her hot heavy weight, her soft waking mewls. It is a Tuesday morning, a quiet day, some mothers with their toddlers, a couple of keen adults bouncing alone on the basketball trampoline. She takes the baby out and feeds her with the bottle she brought in her pocket, her back against the pulsing wall. The baby's mouth moves rhythmically. Someone makes a noise of surprise nearby and Ruth ducks her head, not looking up. A child and a mother slide past her, the mother averting her gaze, the child staring, and then they are gone. Ori finishes drinking and falls asleep, Ruth holds her. Someone else is coming, the weight of the floor around her displaced. She puts the baby down, begins trying to put on the sling quickly. It is JP.

Oh, wow, she says.

In that moment Ruth is not certain what her words mean, her face in the dim light, her arms crossed. Her expression seems unfriendly, her mouth wide.

Ed wants you to work in the café for a couple of hours, she says.

Ruth tries to tie the sling faster, the strap is tangled, the baby on the floor is bounced and starts to roll, flailing. JP bends to pick the baby up, holds her.

Give me the sling. I'll take her. I can say there's something that needs cleaning up down here.

Really?

Really. Quick. She's so little. What's her name?

Ori.

Like the bear. OK, go. Come back after lunch and find me.

When she goes to find JP later, she is balanced high up at the top of the slide, swaying sleeping Ori in her arms. There is a group of curious children, five or six years old, gathered at her knees, staring up at the baby.

OK, down the slide now. You first, little blonde one. Ready, steady, go. You next, my friend, whoosh.

Ruth climbs up to meet them. Ori is flat out, her eyes moving swiftly and dreamily behind her lids. Ruth takes the baby and she mithers and frowns and suckles on her fist.

Thank you, Ruth says.

No problem, JP says. I'm nearly finished. Do you want to have a drink?

They buy two cans of beer from a corner shop and walk and drink so JP isn't late picking up her children. The beer is warm and it's been so long since Ruth drank that it makes her feel foggy. JP is tall and walks fast with a long looping gait, quickly overtaking other walkers on the path. She moves her arms as she talks, gesticulating quite furiously. The baby knocks and jostles against Ruth's chest. JP takes Ruth's can from her and twizzles on the spot. Watch this. She crushes the can and then aims it at a bin, fires it, misses.

That was so rubbish. I'm ashamed. My childminder's is down here.

I don't live far, Ruth says.

Oh yeah. Where?

Ruth points in the direction of the flats where she and Dylan have been living.

I'm that way too, JP says, on East Avenue. We live above an ice cream shop at the moment but it's covered in black mould and the landlord keeps replying to my voicemails with texts about opening the windows so it'll dry, so I hope we'll be able to move.

OK, Ruth says. See you?

Yeah, see you. JP is already moving off, throwing an arm back in farewell.

When she gets back to the flat no one is there. There is silence from the hallway. The big TV where Georgio plays his games is switched off. She says Dylan's name. She finds herself afraid and then, beyond logic, wonders if she has come into the wrong flat. Dylan is not in the bedroom. He has probably, she thinks, just gone out to get chips from the takeaway he likes; or picked up an extra shift at the supermarket. Except, when she goes through the piles of their things scattered around the room, almost all of his clothes are gone, only a jumper and some socks left, the book that he brought with him and hasn't read. She goes around and around the flat, pacing, touching things. She is moving so fast it takes her a long time to find the note, slid under a Tenerife magnet on the fridge. *Sorry, it says, love you.* She adjusts Ori in the sling and then leaves the flat. Ori blinks at the bright light, turns her eyes. They go down the street. She starts to run. She does not know where she is running until she gets there, the narrow street

where she left JP. She goes down it, jostling the baby against her chest. She goes down the street and it is empty and empty and then, ahead, around the corner, there is the sound of voices, a child laughing, a woman saying something indistinct. She thinks that it will not be them but it is. Seeing JP's face rising to look at her, questioningly, she realises that she does not know this woman. The children have noticed her and are looking at their mother, waiting. The baby in her arms is starting to turn her head, she is hungry. He's gone, she wants to say, but cannot.

Come on, JP says.

JP cracks a can of baked beans and then another and spoons them into a saucepan, puts the bread into the toaster, makes coffee. Nora, the little girl, brings Ruth her stuffed toy giraffe. She is nearly two, clomp-footed, snott-nosed.

What's he called? Ruth says.

Nora doesn't answer, she is transfixed by the baby, her face only inches away, holding on to Ori's toes. Leo is six and on hands and knees in the kitchen, building something out of Lego, occasionally pausing to whisper conspiratorially into his mother's ear. Ruth keeps forgetting that Dylan has gone and then remembering again. The remembering is a cold, awful wave. She can feel her arms clenching around Ori, making her squirm. Nora keeps pointing, showing off her talking, ruddy with pride. Bird, she says, pronouncing it with a y. *Biyd, biyd*.

JP brings out plates of toast and beans and cheese.

Let me take her. My little trampoline friend, I've missed you. You eat while it's hot. When Leo was a baby I didn't eat anything that wasn't stone-cold or scooped off the top of a baby's head.

Ruth eats the beans, helps Nora manoeuvre her spoon. Leo tells her intently about lions. They roar like this, he says.

Here, JP says, hold this one.

Ruth sits on the chair and holds Ori, feeds her a bottle when she wakes up. She waits for JP to ask her to leave. She will not go herself; she cannot make herself do it. That flat with the stale smell of congealed pizza, the rattle of machine-gun fire from the video games, Dylan's note stuck up on the fridge. She sits like stone in the chair as everyone rushes around. The sound of the bath running, the crackle of Nora's audiobook player.

Oh god, everyone is asleep, JP says at some point, dropping into a chair next to her. Or, at least, I have shut the door to their room.

I'm still here, Ruth says. She doesn't know what she means by it, is embarrassed to hear it coming out of her mouth. She starts trying to pick Ori's jumper off the floor so she can go.

Yeah. That's good, JP says. I need a drink. I only have gin. The kids' dad drinks it and he was here a couple of months ago so that's all I have. I have gin and Sprite? Yes?

Yes, Ruth says. But I can go.

You can stay. Stay. Please. Let me hold that baby while you make us a fancy cocktail.

Ruth gets up and mixes the gin and Sprite in the only cups she can find left in the cupboard. They sit at the table and drink together.

You were running, JP says after a moment. I turned around and you were hammering down the street towards us. I thought you were being chased. I was ready to kill a man.

I'm sorry.

That's OK.

The person I lived with is gone. He wasn't Ori's dad but we looked after her together. I guess he was her dad. He's gone. He left a note.

Shit.

I can't afford rent without him. I don't know who will look after her while I work. I don't know what to do.

I've been there. When Leo was little. Actually, again when Nora was. A few times. Their dad is a real will-o'-the-wisp.

What did you do?

I don't know. I guess the first time an old lady nearby looked after Leo for me in exchange for my cooking meals and cleaning her house. She had arthritis. The second time Leo could go to nursery but I had to just take Nora with me. I lost a load of jobs. No one really wants a woman with a baby turning up to serve burgers or give them their popcorn.

I think I need another drink, Ruth says.

I think you do. This Sprite is flat though, it's upsetting. Listen, I know we don't know one another that well. I hate those bouncing shitheads. They make me angry. But I'm good with children. We could help one another. Nora's childcare is so expensive at the moment. I'm just talking as I think. I'll stop if you tell me to. But we could help one another. We could share

childcare; it'll still be tight but if we move in together – I'm just talking and talking.

Yes, Ruth says.

Yes?

Yes. Please.

I'll get that drink now then. Yes.

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Ruth

Ruth sets the children to dig for coins down the back of the ratty green sofa while she tries to get enough costumes and towels together. There is a big chest of drawers JP dragged home gleefully one evening, the scraping sound of her approaching, hollering for help. One of the other women, Sally, took it out into the concrete yard and sanded it down, repainted it and then stencilled red flowers around the edges. The children snuck out at dusk as the women chopped carrots and argued about the rota and stuck their hands in the paint pot, left prints all over the front of the drawers. They get kids' clothes from boxes left on the street, charity sales and donations, and none of them fit right or they give way almost immediately at the seams but get shoved, nonetheless, into the chest of drawers and tugged out at random to put on whichever child needs them. Ori likes to go in by herself and dig thoughtfully through, chucking rejected dungarees and tie-dye t-shirts over her shoulder, plopping down on her backside to wrangle on leggings. Most of the swimming costumes are nearly see-through from washing, the straps snapped, but Ruth manages to find enough and takes a handful of drying towels off the banister, puts them into the bag. The sun cream is out of date but will do the job. When she gets back into the sitting room the cushions have been heaved off the sofa and everyone is bouncing on the wheezing springs. They have uncovered crushed breadsticks and moulding apple cores but also a handful of lost twenty pence pieces, just enough for them all to get into the lido if she lies about some of their ages. She has been working all week but today she is in charge. Ori rushes over and burbles something about jumping as high as the trees like a bird no like a dragon, and then tugs a pirate hat down as far as it will fit onto Ruth's head.

Let's go, let's go, she shouts, and everyone gathers, grabbing at shoes. There is Ori who is three – dressed this morning in a rainbow unicorn outfit with a wilting horn and a grubby tail – and Nora with her shoes on the

wrong feet and Leo, who is nine and expert at making mayonnaise-and-cheese sandwiches and wrapping them in foil. Last time they went to the lido he stole a rubber ring and he wears it slung around his middle now, hitching it up with one hand when it slithers down to his knees. There is also Bee, who is nearly two and who Ruth puts up on her hip to get out the door, and Tsembi who is seven and has a younger brother, Douglas, who bends to shit in his nappy beside the step, grunting intently. Sally has been making planters out of pallets to try to make some more money and they are stacked up outside the house with FOR SALE signs pinned to them. They make it down to the path and go in a ragtag snaky line away from the house, Ruth yelling hold hands, hold hands, until everyone is pinned to someone else and trailing along. There isn't enough cash for the bus. They walk. Ruth hitches Bee onto her shoulders and Leo and Tsembi take turns carrying Douglas. It takes a long time. She changes Douglas's nappy while the others climb onto the back of the bench and compare war wounds. Douglas's shit is runny and filled with little white worms again, it won't be long before the others get them too. Ori is yelling loudly about being the fastest, fastest, fastest one and twisting back and forth to show off her scrapes and bumps, her multiple Moomin plasters, which are grubby and starting to peel. Leo is hanging near her, his fingers are beginning to tap a little in the way they do when everything is too loud and busy, his eyes glazing; she calls him closer, tries to distract him, asks him to pass her cloths and then take the dirty nappy to a bin. Nora and Ori are arguing about who can stand on the back of the bench without holding on for longest. Bee is crouching and prodding at a snail nearby while Tsembi shouts at her to give it a rest, he's only little, give it a rest.

They make it to the pool. At the turnstile she counts heads and shoves the handful of coins in. They throw their towels down onto the brown grass and the kids strip off and fight over swimming costumes. She slathers sunscreen on arms and legs and tries to stop Bee from falling in. Douglas examines his willy with his legs in the air and cries when a fat bee stings him on his round little belly. She scoops him up in one arm and gives him a sandwich. The older children are wading into the shallow end and lifting the water up in their hands and throwing it at one another, Leo is dunking his head beneath the surface where it must be good and quiet. Ori is leaping from the side over and over again, the force of her body leaving an after-star-shape in the air. Ruth gives Bee a sandwich too and puts on her own costume. It is

one of JP's and cuts in around the shoulders. Her mind is a rushing thing, trying to keep everyone in sight, tallying up who has sunscreen on, thinking about what needs doing that day back at the house, thinking about the swarm of woodlice which have infested the room where she and JP and the kids sleep, seeming to dig their way up through the floors. There is a leak coming through the roof when it rains and sewage down the wall in the concrete yard whenever anyone upstairs flushes the chain.

One night she woke, damp with sweat. JP was beside her on the blow-up mattress and Leo and Nora were sprawled across the single beds the children were sleeping on but, she looked again, Ori was not there. Ruth went out into the corridor. There was noise from the rooms above, which are rented out separately by students who they never see, only hear. She had a sudden damp nightmare vision of Ori spirited away or, rather, having never existed. She had never had a child. Sometimes, when she was pregnant, she had wished her away and now she was gone, she had never even been. It made her think of the woman in the river she had seen when she was a child, wading in with the baby on her front. She ran down the stairs. The front door was swinging wide and there was a white square of mucky moon and street light across the floor. Someone – one of the students – had left a half-finished wine bottle on the front step. Ori was not in the yard among the stacked unsold planters and experimental wooden birdhouses. A noise from the sitting room. Cheerios crunched under her feet. Ori was bent in the corner, drawing with an imaginary pencil on the floor, talking quietly to herself. When Ruth pressed gently on her spine she sagged into Ruth's arms, closed her eyes. That was the first time she walked in her sleep.

The next day Ruth went and screamed at the hungover students who came blearily out of their separate, pizza-stinking rooms and scowled at her. Close the fucking front door, what is wrong with you?

Ruth tried everything to stop Ori getting out of the room at night. She tied them together by the wrist, she slept in front of the bedroom door, but always, somehow, Ori slipped free and Ruth would wake to her gone. It was a daytime and a night-time problem. She was, JP said in exasperation after another desperate loudspeaker call-out in the supermarket, a runner. Where had she got it from? This speedy, goat-like need to escape? Often, at the

point of realising she was lost, she would sit and wail. When they found her, she would be beside herself: you lost me, where were you?

Ruth found herself thinking of those nights when the door of her childhood bedroom was locked against escape and she would knock on the walls and it would mean *I am here, I am here, are you there?* One breakfast she undid the tie from JP's dressing gown and rummaged around in the cupboard. The children were at the table, spoons hovering over their porridge, rumped from sleep, watching her with suspicion. Ruth dug out a saucepan lid and tied it around Ori's neck, gave her a metal spoon to bash it with. Ori's eyes grew wide and she stood up on her chair. Bang, bang, bang, went the spoon on the saucepan, bang, bang, bang.

That's loud, JP said, holding closed her dressing gown.

Well, we can hear where she is now, at least in the day, Ruth said.

After that often Ori would be given the saucepan lid or, if there was nothing else, stones from the ground or two sticks broken off a tree. JP started calling her Oystercatcher after the birds that hammer or drop mussels or clams to try to get them open.

At night, though, the sleepwalking continued and then began to get worse. One bad occasion Ori made it all the way to the garden and was fiddling with the gate that led to the road before Ruth got to her. She was barefooted and tangle-haired, moving fast. Ruth grabbed her, took her back inside, held her. Everyone was awake now, a bit upset, shifting around, Nora complaining, Leo singing quietly and tapping his fingers. Ruth, to try to calm them, began to tell the story of the knocking, not the wall one but the other. When you were in my belly, she said to Ori, I knocked and said *hello, hello* and from the other side you knocked and said *I hear you, hello, how are you today?*

JP went out of the room and came back with the saucepan lid. She strung it – more, Ruth suspected, for comedic effect than anything else – around Ori's neck, tied a wooden spoon to the edge of the lid.

Just knock in your sleep, she said, and Nora and Leo howled and danced around, pretending to be sleepwalking, while Ori frowned thoughtfully, working out whether to be annoyed.

Later, Ruth woke hard and sat up. A noise had come into her dreams and disturbed them. She had been dreaming about her mother in the kitchen of the house, she was wearing a green apron and stirring a large metal bowl and then she turned and looked straight at Ruth and said: is someone at the

door again? Ruth sat up. Next to her JP was already out of bed, crossing the room. She opened the door into the corridor. Past her Ruth could see Ori. She was sitting on the floor, cross-legged, head bobbing to the sound as she struck the saucepan lid over and over and over.

I hear you, JP said, I hear you, you're here, don't wake the whole house.

She takes the younger children into the water, floating them on their backs. There are some other parents there she knows a little, a few childminders with their own hordes of children, some serious swimmers in the main lanes ploughing up and down, up and down. Leo gets Ori on his shoulders and ducks beneath the water and then explodes upwards and she spins backwards and lands with a muffled boom and they do it again. Nora wants to show Ruth every one of the drowning beetles and wasps she is rescuing from the water. Douglas is mostly scared and clings onto her back like a splatted, soggy thing. They stay in for a few hours and then crawl out and lie on the grass under the sun. Some of the kids cry because they are tired and hungry. She feeds them sandwiches and they count out their coins and there is just enough for chips from the van. Leo comes back with a container and some ketchup. Ruth wraps Bee and Douglas and Ori in towels and lies down among them and sings them a song and they doze and wake and cry a bit and wipe their snotty noses on her arms and then sleep again. She thinks Ori is sleeping but feels something on her cheeks and opens her eyes and her face is directly above Ruth's, nose to nose, water droplets falling from the strands of her straggling hair. Another of the women gave the kids haircuts, one after the other, bang, bang, bang, army-style, and they are all bowl-cutted now, spiky around the edges.

Mama come, Ori says, come on Mama, up.

She unravels herself from the other two and gets up and takes Ori's hand. Leo is reading a book he has stolen from a sunbathing woman's blanket. Tsembi is swimming choppy doggy-paddle up and down, copying the lane swimmers. Nora is digging for worms. Ori and Ruth investigate the bushes around the edge of the pool. There is a stretch of rubber tiles and an old, broken sprinkler system with rusted sharp edges, and beyond some giant overgrown wisteria bushes. Ori has brought some worn plastic animals with her without Ruth noticing, a zebra with barely any stripes left, a polar bear without back legs.

What do bears eat? Ori says, shoving the nose of the polar bear into the hardened ground.

I don't know. Honey?

No. Silly Mama. Definitely not.

I don't know then. Maybe fish?

Yeah, maybe. Here's a bear dance I just made up, she says, and jiggles and jaggles around, pushing her belly and her lips out and then sucking them in, sticking out her bottom.

That's cool, I like it.

Yeah, maybe. Now you do it.

Ruth tries to copy the dance exactly, waggling around.

Not bad? she says.

A bit bad, Ori says. A bit poo-poo. She laughs and laughs.

JP comes down after work and kicks off her shoes and sticks her feet in the pool. Ori flings her arms around JP's neck and Nora and Leo show her the handstands they have been perfecting in the pool. The little ones have woken up and taken off their costumes and are back in the water.

How's it going? Ruth says to JP.

Bouncing and bouncing and bouncing, JP says, bouncing motherfuckers, they need to stop bouncing and get a job. How's it going in the madhouse?

Fine, Ruth says, and tells her about worms and nappies. I'm so tired that I could sink into the water and sleep there actually.

Like a whale. Do you want to do a lap?

Yeah, Ruth says.

She leaves the children and goes to the adult side of the swimming pool. Her swimming costume is so thin she thinks maybe everyone can see her bottom through it. She drops into the water. Some of the other women are wearing goggles and swim hats. She lets herself go down under the surface. It is not silent there but the noise comes wonky through the water and resounds bubbling through her. She swims along the bottom with her belly scraping and then rises up and does a couple of lengths and then goes back to JP, who is yelling at Bee not to touch Douglas's bottom if he tells her not to. She can tell, from looking at Leo, that he has got overwhelmed by the noise and the argument. She sits beside him until he seems better and then she and JP lie in the last bit of the sun. It is good on Ruth's face, warming her closed eyelids.

Look, JP says. When Ruth opens her eyes, JP is up on her elbows. Ruth levers herself upright. The children are playing a game. It is not one she has seen them play before.

What is it? she says.

Have you not seen this yet? Just watch.

Nora has blindfolded herself with a towel wrapped around her head. All of the children are there, on the grassy bit a little away from the pool, but Douglas isn't really playing. They all have two stones and Nora has two stones also, her stones a little bigger than everyone else's. They space themselves out. Blindfolded, Nora knocks her two stones against one another, tap, tap. The rest of them tap their stones together and Nora lurches forward, already laughing without making noise, and tries to get to them by figuring out where their taps came from. She nearly gets Leo because he is laughing so hard but he skips out of the way and Nora has to stop and knock her stones together again. The rest of them, standing still, knock their stones together and the sound means: I AM HERE. Nora comes for them. Ori darts away and then climbs up the metal fence and Nora knocks her stones together, asking WHERE ARE YOU, WHERE ARE YOU, and Ori knocks her stones together from the fence, I AM HERE, I AM HERE, and Nora comes and catches at her feet. They play for a long time, taking turns with the blindfold.

A knocking game, Ruth says.

Isn't it good. Ori came up with it yesterday in the garden when I locked them out so I could make dinner. We should go, JP says.

Yup, she says.

They walk home the long way, carrying all the children's shoes in their hands. The children play a game involving trains chugging along a track. They stop briefly at a playground with a rusty red swing and a dirt groove beneath. The others like the slide, going down in a pile, seeing who can run down, but Ori likes the swing. She will stay on the swing for hours if they let her, clinging on to the metal chains, her torso tipped backwards, her chin rolled to the sky. JP and Ruth sit on a bench and talk about the childcare funding which they had hoped was going to help them out but which is less than half what they thought it was going to be and whether they think the homeschooling is going OK. They talk about these things a lot and sometimes there are meetings in the house with the other women and with new women who come and go and mostly they all say: I don't know what

to do, I'm not sure. Sometimes the meetings are really good and people cry and talk and sometimes they all get annoyed and impatient and no one agrees and they just argue until they're too tired to continue. There is supposed to be another meeting that night after the kids are asleep. JP rolls her eyes and sticks out her tongue and says, I can't talk about Sally quitting her job and making birdhouses anymore, she's already bringing in hardly anything and Douglas and Tsembi eat so much.

Ruth laughs. Then they talk about what they want to say tonight.

This is what I was going to say, shall I try it out on you? JP says.

Go for it, Ruth says.

Great. Hold on, she says, and they check on the children, count them, and Ruth looks for Leo who listens to everything, and makes sure he is out of earshot. Let's go everyone, they shout. They walk together along the road and JP holds Ruth's hand.

Well, I was going to say that I love them, obviously. I love all of them. I love Leo and Nora and I feel that I am the most lucky person to be their mum. I love Ori, I love that kid, did you know that?

Yeah, Ruth says.

I love their weird bodies and their silly sentences and I love that they were tiny and useless and now they're just these crazy roommates. I was going to say all that but then I was going to say: I love them but I hate them.

Oh yeah, that's true, Ruth says.

Like what have they done to my life? Do they know that they are little bombs hidden under my floors and that they go off ten times a day?

Fifty times.

A hundred and thousand and million times. They don't know who I was before. I was a whole person. I was a child once and then I had a child and that child killed the child I was. That is insane.

It's insane.

I was going to say something like that, JP says. What do you think?

I think it sounds good, Ruth says. I think I'm going to say something like that too. It's like we destroyed ourselves. We annihilated ourselves. And no one helps us. We have to help ourselves and we need help, don't we?

Definitely. We need some motherfucking nannies. We need some funding, right? Like some funding we could apply for, like arts council funding but the project is raising some children and not doing it wrong and not going completely insane and killing everyone.

Let's say that, Ruth says. She goes forward and scoops up Nora, who is wailing about having tired legs, and puts her on her shoulders.

I was also thinking about what you were saying about your island, JP says.

OK? Ruth says.

I know I've been saying that you are batshit but maybe actually you're right. Hold on, don't get too excited, I still don't think we should move to an island. That is mad. But, like, what you sometimes say about it being really hard and that there must be a community way of living that makes it easier – like together, we help ourselves. Something a bit like the way it is now but much better, more organised. I don't know.

One day you'll come around to the island, Ruth says.

I don't know about that, JP says.

Ruth pauses to rearrange Nora into a more comfortable position on her shoulders. They have been arguing about the island for such a long time now, since Ori was a tiny baby that they took turns carrying around JP's kitchen late at night until she slept.

Anyhow, what are you going to say tonight then?

I was maybe going to tell them about the woman in the water, Ruth says. She has only just, this moment, decided it is what she will do.

OK, JP says. You haven't talked about her for ages.

I know. But I think about her a lot.

I didn't know that.

Yeah. A lot. Sometimes I'm sure I know her; I don't know how. She's someone I know so well. I can't get hold of who. Anyway, I think that, this is big actually, are you ready?

So ready.

I think that if I hadn't have met you, I could have been her. Really easily. It was so hard. It was so hard all of the time. And it's hard now but we aren't on our own anymore and that is good. I think if I hadn't met you after Dylan left, I might have walked to the river too, not straight away but eventually.

Yeah, JP says, and picks up Bee in one arm and Ori in the other and they go around the corner to the rotting house.

Ori says, Mama, what's that noise?

There is a sound like a siren, which, as they get closer, clarifies into the noise of shouting and loud banging. They go around the corner and the

rotting house is there. Sally and Bee's mother, Ana, have got back from work and are standing on the kerb. Sally is shouting and shouting, spit coming out of her mouth. Tsembi and Douglas run up to Sally and Bee runs up to Ana and the mothers look back at JP and Ruth. The doors and windows of the rotting house are all open. The students, Ana says, called the landlord and told them how many people are living in the rest of the house. The landlord has sent some people around and the people are taking the little furniture the women have and throwing it out onto the grass. They have smashed all the windows so that they cannot go back inside. One of them is hitting the white-painted, red-flower-stencilled chest of drawers with a metal pole until it smashes. Sally is yelling and then JP is rushing in, grabbing at the man with the metal pole. Ruth takes Ori and Leo and Nora around the corner and they sit on a bench and wait for it to be over.

Ruth and JP and the children stay that night in a hostel. The other women have vanished. The hostel is full of young men drinking in the common room and the shared microwave is very dirty. They pay extra for a room with a private wet room and a lock on the door and JP goes out to buy food from the supermarket on the corner. The children like the metal bunkbeds which line both walls and rattle and clang as they leap from them. Leo invents a game called DON'T TOUCH THE WATER which includes life rafts made out of coats and a chair dragged in from the common room. Ruth unpacks their bags and tries to find places to put things and feels worried. Ori plays the game and shrieks laughter, loses merrily, pretends to drown on the grimy carpet, heaves herself up onto a passing pirate ship; but when Ruth goes into the bathroom and pulls the slide door across, she follows her, slams with her fists, screams.

I just need a wee, Ruth tells her.

No, Ori says, no.

Ruth leads her to the bed and plops her down. Nora comes over and lies beside her, kicking her feet up to press against the springs of the top bunk. Ruth wants, quite desperately, a moment alone, to close her eyes and try to figure out a plan. Ori has her hand wrapped tightly around Ruth's wrist, closed hard enough to leave a bruise. Ruth takes her shoe off and knocks it loudly against the bedpost, which is metal and rings out, and then, taking a step back, she knocks it against the wall and then against the door and then against the door to the bathroom and she backs into the bathroom and

knocks it again and again on the stained sink while she closes the door. In the room beyond there is silence and then, after a time, a repeated knocking in return, Ori and the others all bashing some object against the bunkbeds. Ruth sits on the closed toilet seat, knocking and knocking, and thinks: *I don't know what to do.*

Later, Leo falls asleep on the floor and JP has to lift him into the bottom bunk, tugging the thin yellowing duvet over him. When Ruth looks up, Nora and Ori are peering down at her, their fingers curled around the bar surrounding the top bunk. She climbs up and plops down between them. Their mouths are cold, pressed against her cheeks, their fingers are nasty and tugging, tangling in her hair. They are frightened. She clucks her tongue at them and they mimic her, clicking their lips experimentally.

We can't sleep here, it's too loud, Nora says.

We can't sleep here, Ori says, although when Ruth looks, she sees that her eyelids are flickering.

Tell us about the island. We can't go to sleep without a story, Nora says.

She lies still, trying to remember what she told them the night before, in the big house. She has started dreaming about the island again, the way she did the summer when Dylan left with his brothers and she was locked in for the first time. The island rose up the walls of her sweltering bedroom like a moon. In the big house she kept catching glimpses of it, a rocky, sun-lit ghost, sliding across the floors, waking her with a noise like the sea. Even when Ori was a baby and Ruth was so tired she couldn't walk straight she would tell her stories about the island. She populated it with the things they saw around them in the city: turned their neighbours into pelicans and enormous-toothed seals, erected the old lighthouse she knew was there as a tower block, covered in flowers and populated entirely by children. When things were bad (the winter Ori caught measles, the evictions and leaky ceilings) the island was soft, a forever day, the sea as warm as cooling tea, the caves beneath illuminated with bioluminescence, the sky filled with wings and Ruth and Ori hiding there; but at times the island was flotsam for their changing moods, covered in angry sheet storms that walked on trembling churning cloud legs and tore up their precious lighthouse. The island is a heady sickness, like sunburn, that dwindles and ebbs and then is roused once more, carried always within her, a secret ache of somewhere else, something else. Tonight, in the loud hostel, a chair wedged underneath

the door handle to stop anyone getting in from the outside, it is so close she can almost smell it. It is not the same island that was there when she was a child and then a teenager in that town beside the river. When she thought about it then she thought about Marvin, swimming in the sea, crawling out to lie next to her, and she thought about getting drunk and she thought about how impossible it would be for her mother to find her there. In those days when she thought about the island it was unmoored, it was not tied to the bottom of the sea, it could float away if she wanted it to and never come back. Now it is a different place. There are lots of children in the clearing and it is safe for them all, it belongs to them, no one will ever tell them to leave.

Mama, Ori says tiredly. Her eyes are closed, her mouth ajar as she breathes. Ruth has been quiet for too long. Nora's eyes glow.

OK, Ruth says. I've told you about the hares?

Nora nods. Ruth wonders if Ori is already asleep; her breathing has deepened.

The hares are the ones that carry the sun out of the sea on their backs. They climb down the cliffs and into the water and they heave the sun from where it has fallen beneath the waves. At times there are so many hares that the island will tip and topple right over, turning upside down. And so, in the spring, the families who live on the island kill some of the hares. They use their fur for warm blankets and they use their bodies in pies. It is warm in the spring and there is blossom on the apple trees. There is the smell of cooking pastry and hare meat. The women will sell the pies on the mainland and come back with chocolate.

When she opens her eyes, the girls are asleep and JP has come out of the steamy bathroom and is standing in the gloom, listening to her. Neither of them moves. The room fills with the sound of the children's breathing, the noise of Ori's teeth grinding gently together.

Ruth

It is three years since they swam at the pool and walked home to find the house no longer belonged to them. It is March and they have come to the ancient lighthouse on the northernmost crest of the island. The girl in hand-me-down red dungarees and yellow bee wings already torn and flapping in the sea winds. Others have been here before them. Still remaining: the crushed beer cans chucked into the mire of head-high nettles and brambles, the careless clutter of crisp packets and jellyfish condoms. The lighthouse is enclosed in wildness, the walls shaggy with ivy and creeper, the smashed doorway clogged with thorny mess and inaccessible. Above the fray of green the white walls are crumbling and grubby, the windows are smashed. Ori is wearing the thick fluorescent yellow jacket with the hood pulled up and zipped to the mouth, the bee wings wedged on over the top. She plays games with sticks while Ruth hacks at branches with the axe to make a fire. Ruth's hair is cropped right back and she wears, a Christmas present from JP, a mothy fur-lined hat with ear flaps that itches her scalp, and steel-toe boots they stole from a building site. Ori investigates the bare apple trees, sucks her fingers when she gets too close to the nettles. Ruth keeps her in eyesight. Little city thing, tripping on the uneven ground and spitting blood, a tooth. There are so many things here that could hurt her. Watch out, she shouts as Ori strays towards the edge of the clearing and the rough, hole-pocked cliff beyond, stay close, where are you going?

Ori rushes back to her, arms outstretched.

Like a baby, Ori says to Ruth, hold me like a baby.

Ruth hooks Ori's knees over her elbow. Ori has a lot of questions. What is this? What is that? Can I eat this? What happens if I throw this? Where is the door to that? What is that? What do you mean a lighthouse? Oh. What do you mean a tower? She wants to play pirates. She is feral with excitement and confusion and with the wind that never quite dies down.

They keep trying to speak and finding that the wind has already taken the words. Ori rushes at Ruth, wants to play bees under attack from aliens, wants to play pretending to be grown-ups.

That's enough, Ruth says, it isn't time to play now. She has finally got the fire lit and feels a wave of success. She plops Ori down in front of it to warm up. I need to do the tent. She stands and peels off her coat and jumper.

I am you, Ori says, grappling the jumper on over her puffy jacket and jutting out her chin. That's enough. Look. I am you.

Very good. Watch out.

Ruth is wearing the thin, worn BOUNCE INC t-shirt and she cannot stop the toothy grin that keeps jerking the sides of her mouth open. After so long, they are here. She found the tent in a charity shop and stashed it underneath the caravan where she thought JP wouldn't find it. The tent was missing a couple of pegs but would be fine for a single night's expedition for just two people. It was difficult to get all of the camping supplies ready without JP noticing; Ruth had lost her job because there was always something else that needed preparing. It does not matter. They are here on an adventure. They are here as scouts into the future. They are here as proof of concept. It makes her head spin. She pulls out the poles and starts clicking them together. Above their tipped heads the wind is a gale, a stirred pot, a spoon occasionally thrust down among them; but the sky is blue and there is purple bracken sprouting on the cliff. It is a wild place. She feels the enormity of it in her chest and is nearly felled by it. Here it is, after all this time. In the summer, in the true warmth, it will be very beautiful.

Ori climbs up into the craggy leafless tree and then leaps to the ground. The wind drags her towards the wall of brambles. Ruth comes over and stands beside her. Tomorrow, they will take the rental boat back to the mainland and go home to the caravan. Already Ruth is planning what she will say to JP: listen, I think it could actually work, we don't have to live like this.

What is in there? Ori says, pointing to the dense wall of thorns. Sleeping Beauty?

Maybe, she says, yeah. Sleeping Beauty.

You are the prince. Am I the prince?

I am the prince. I'll get in.

And kiss her. Oh good.

Put your gloves back on, OK?

When she refocuses the lighthouse is murky, already the trees at the brace of the clearing are blurring. Night drops like a stone from the bridge near her childhood house. There is a lace curtain of stars above their heads. They start getting ready to go inside the tent. Ruth hooks her arms beneath Ori's knees and lifts her, aims her stream of piss at the stone. Squats and urinates herself and then hustles them back to the tent. Knees and elbows and feet and knocked noses as they both get in. Ori climbs down inside her sleeping bag, dampens Ruth's face with her breath. Go to sleep, she whispers, go to sleep.

A story, Ori whispers back. Just a little one. A story, Mama.

Her mind goes blank, clears, blanks again. On the boat over, the spray blew in wafts off the sea and coated their open-mouthed faces as they clutched hands and shouted in glee. The island occluded, flashed in and out of vision, and each time it was taken from sight she thought perhaps she had imagined it all along. It was not real. And then, there, again, and the bottom of the boat scraping onto the rocky beach, and the motor cutting out beneath her clamped grip.

What a grand adventure, she kept telling Ori, and Ori would rock on the damp seat and repeat her words. A grand, grand adventure.

Once upon a time, Ruth says, there was an island.

The roof of the tent shivers. She cannot believe they are here. She cannot believe it. She feels it ahead of her, running forward, everything that this place might be.

Ori is sleeping. The noise of the wind through the tent is a choral voice. Ruth dreams of the place that was once home. She dreams of her mother's bed, of the church radiators clicking and churning out heat and the old women loudly singing the hymns.

She wakes sometime later. The sleeping bags are thick enough that Ori's hair sticks in strands to her forehead with sweat. The walls of the tent are dripping with condensation. The wind has dropped entirely and the silence is enormous. Ruth extricates herself into the dewy chill and a burning and shocking sunrise. A creature that she takes a moment to identify as a hare is dancing on the rocky crest at the edge of the clearing, its fur white, brazen, hips flung, neck arched. Another dream?

Ori is calling out from the tent. When Ruth ducks inside the girl's face is protruding, owlshly, from the gap in the sleeping bag. Ruth unwraps the

loaf of bread from the bag and they eat two slices each with peanut butter and then drink the juice from a tin of peaches which she pierced with a knife. Ori masticates thoughtfully, rubbing her eyes.

Where are we? Where are we?

On the island.

Oh yeah.

Weak good sun on their raised faces, on the green leaves of the trees. They sing working songs to one another and take down the tent. They leap around and play silly monkeys and venture out onto the cliff to shout their own names into the wind. Their time there is coming to an end. She does not want to leave. She wants to stay for longer. She delays and delays. Ori holds her hand and they take big steps around the clearing, measuring out raised vegetable beds they will make with wooden pallets and the chicken hutch with the ramp. Ori busies herself looking for the perfect combination of stones, lifting and knocking and then dropping and reaching for another. When she has found them she shows them to Ruth.

Look, she says, and holds them close to Ruth's ear so that she can hear the sound they make when they are bashed together.

So good, Ruth says.

And shall we get Chinese tonight to say sorry to JP? Ori says.

That's a good idea.

Yes. And shall we have a nice lovely hot bath?

That's a good idea too.

Still, she lingers – Ori studying her with her thinking face – trying to find reasons to stay. She can see so clearly how they will live here, exactly the way she dreamed it when she first met JP, the rush of children, the ground overturned.

Mama, Ori says.

Shall we try to get into the lighthouse one more time?

OK, Ori says.

Just a little longer, Ruth says, and then we will go to the boat.

At the front of the lighthouse she picks a particular elongated growth and attacks it viciously with the metal axe, working hard. Her hands are purple and numb from the cold and the blood from the thorns runs down her wrists, very hot. At the end she gets almost close and she forces herself through, arms crossed over her face to protect it, hair grabbed and pulled

taut and then torn free. She makes headway and then is trapped, her clothes pinned in many places so that she cannot go forward or back. Ori is making a bird call of alarm from behind her. Mama, Mama, Mama. Ruth hangs like a rodent on a thorn bush and then gets herself free, falls back. Ori covers her face with kisses, licking the blood from her cut cheeks.

Did the prince bleed? Ori says.

I don't think so.

Are we going home now?

Soon. One day this will be our home.

This? Ori says, spreading her arms to take in the clearing, the impenetrable wall of brambles.

Yes. Except it will be different. It will be good. If you just imagine it.

She goes to the spring to wash away the blood. The water coming from beneath the stone is very cold and tastes so good when she laps at it. When she straightens up and looks back Ori is nowhere to be seen. Ruth stands and howls her name. She turns and turns in blinded panic and fury. A noise like a seagull then and when she looks Ori is on the other side of the thorns, beside the wall of the lighthouse, flashing her teeth. Ruth stands for a moment to let her pulse cool.

How did you do that? she says.

There, look, a path.

She is right. At ground level there is a break where the thick branches lift, not much space, maybe enough. Ruth drops to hands and knees and wrestles forward with Ori calling out encouragement and unhelpful instructions from beside the lighthouse. At last she is held and then released. She is through. Ori is jumping and gleeful. We can show Nora, she keeps saying, we can show Nora. Ruth doesn't reply, she is uncertain how JP will respond to this secret island trip. The wall of the lighthouse up ahead, rough whitewashed stone. She circles it, belly in, scraping along. Ori goes ahead skipping, singing. The door has fallen and the brambles grow up and around it, the entrance a black square that she climbs through. Very little light, the brambles acting as great blinds, filling the windows. The undergrowth has broken in and grows all over everything, over the floor and the walls. She feels her way forward. Something rolls away from beneath her boot. Ahead, a filamented square. She goes through it and into a ragged, white-wall hallway, filled with blazing light from above. The stairs go up and up, circling. She can hear Ori outside chanting something, an

incantation. The vines and ivy have not made it this far yet. There is rubble on the floor, fallen from above. The bolts holding the metal stairs in place have detached from the wall and the staircase swings slightly even as she does not touch it. There are empty beer bottles on the floor, a smeared smoky mark where someone must once have had a fire. She looks up at the stairs and a blissed-out imagining covers her. She is at the bottom of the stairs looking up. The lighthouse is the same but different, filled with so much sunlight. There are other people, she cannot see them but she can hear them, moving about, talking to one another, laughing. There is the noise of children. She has paused, here, at the bottom of the stairs to listen to them, their quick conversations, their certainty which builds and builds into a certainty in her, an ease that barrels through her and steals the waking anxiety of mothering and somehow beyond there is something else, there is some breakage which is not death but living, maybe, maybe just living.

Shall we go home now Mama, Ori says.

A little longer my love, just a little longer. She is not sure exactly what she is staying for. They wrangle themselves out through the thorns again, Ori darting ahead. On the other side she surveys the tight corset of brambles and then says, shall we see if we can set it on fire?

Ori is silent. With some difficulty Ruth lights a branch and lifts it above her head. It blazes against the silver sky, the rush of clouds. When she holds it to the brambles it gutters, does not immediately take, and then, like petrol, blazes. She takes Ori's hand and they retreat to the trees and stand watching. The lighthouse does not burn but it looks as if it burns.

Will there be mayo in the lighthouse future?

We'll make our own, Ruth says.

No, mayo comes in a jar, Ori says, and won't be persuaded otherwise, gets weepy at the thought of eggs and oil whisked together.

They pack up. Ori puts stones into her pockets, singing *beautiful stone, beautiful stone*. Every part of Ruth cries out not to go even as she heaves the bag onto her back.

Listen, she says, I think I should go and see a little more of the island.

Even as she says it she knows the wrongness of this particular want and tries to shut it down but cannot. She has seen so little; she has barely touched the surface of this place. She wants to open herself and swallow it whole. How is it possible that they can go now? She does not want to go

back to the cramped caravan and try to explain to JP about the island. Listen, she will say, just listen to me. Here, everything is possible.

I will come also, Ori says.

She knows that it is not the right thing to do but, still, she does not want Ori to come. She wants, intensely, to be alone. She wants to be as she was as a teenager, free to go here and there, free to run across the flat cliff and down onto the beach.

Ori, predicting what she is going to say, turns quiet and stern with fear.

It's OK, look, the lighthouse will keep an eye on you, Ruth says. She just wants a moment to remember what she felt about the island before Ori was even growing inside her, when she was a child, before the headlights of the car.

She reaches into Ori's pocket. It is full, nearly to the brim, with stones that rattle and clank against one another. She holds some in her hand and they examine them, pick the good ones, smooth and flat, comforting. She puts the girl near the fire and wraps her in the sleeping bag and she holds the stones and bashes them together. They make a surprisingly large noise when they are hit in such a way.

OK? I will hold my stones and I will knock them together so you will hear me when I get close.

And I will hold mine, Ori says in a determined way, scowling hard. I will hold mine.

Yes. You knock yours together too. And I won't be long, I won't be long at all.

Part Six

CAR HEADLIGHTS

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Edith

She did not see the boy fall from the tree. He lay on the ground and made animal sounds. Ruth came and put her sticky hand into Edith's and her head against Edith's leg. The boy grew quiet with pain and the ambulance came. Edith stood in the shadows by the house. Patrick moved with such sureness. There were grass stains on the knees of his jeans when he stood. She tried to busy herself with the table, emptying and stacking the bowls, gathering the glasses. The smell of the full ashtray. In the kitchen her hands were shaking enough that she sliced her thumb on a knife hidden in the suds. Blood on the bubbles and on the tea towel she used to staunch it.

Sometimes, as a way of concocting panic, she imagines Ruth falling. She falls from the tree. She is knocked down on her bike. She gets sick and never recovers. Edith thought it would get easier as Ruth got older but it has not. Where even is Ruth? Edith goes out into the garden. Everyone is gone. The rabbits move anxiously in the pen, the tortoise has somehow tipped itself over; Edith goes and puts him the right way up. Ruth is not there. Edith looks for her in the house and then goes next door to rap at the kitchen door but they are all at the hospital. She stands on the street. The girl's bike is still in the front garden. Where is she? The evening is damp with lingering warmth, the windows of every house on the street are thrown wide. You are, Patrick said in the early days of their courtship, so worried all of the time. This was the time when every touch between them was countable and giant with significance and so she can remember how he used his thumb to smooth the space between her eyebrows.

A sudden noise. From the bridge. A cacophony of car horns and someone shouting and shouting. She starts to run and then stops to take off her tight shoes. At school she ran cross country and she runs now as she did then, with a great and terrible speed, bearing down upon the finishing line.

She lies on the floor beside Ruth's bed, listening to the girl breathing. It is not possible to sleep. She gets up and crosses the hallway to their room. Patrick is on his front in the middle of the mattress, his big arms flung in abandon. On the front of the wardrobe his vestments are hanging ready for the morning. She feels the excess of panic, as it drains, turning to need. She gets beneath the covers and touches his back, soft with hair, and the tops of his legs. He stirs and reaches for her in some invisible understanding. She knows from experience that if he wakes properly he will be awkward with the situation of their bodies, with her want, which sometimes seems an embarrassment between them. If she could she would explain to him the anchoring of this act but these are not words they would ever say to one another. I am brave, she thinks, not knowing what she means. I am brave.

In the morning Ruth is odd and lethargic. Edith brings her breakfast to the bedroom and speaks to her in the way they often do, just chatting, but the girl is cold and staring. Edith senses there is some recrimination, she has made a mistake although she does not know what it is. The girl must be sick. She went into the river, which is dirty, she hallucinated and now she is angry with her mother in a way she never is. In the kitchen Edith tries to speak to Patrick about it but he is distracted and only smiles; yes, it is possible, yes, Ruth will get better soon and it is nothing to worry about. Often she imagines that there is guttering leading from her to Patrick and at times the rainwater runs quite smoothly from one to the other but at other times there are leaves and debris blocking the way. When she looks out into the garden she can see the boys from next door lying on the grass and looking at the house. They are waiting for Ruth to appear, and Edith thinks, with renewed force, that Ruth is not well enough yet.

Ruth wants to go into the garden. Whenever Edith speaks Ruth rolls her eyes. Often she and Ruth would walk hand in hand to school and in the evening Ruth would put her head on Edith's lap in front of the television. It is true that Edith had always wished for a daughter and that for a time Ruth was so exactly as she had wished; but something is different now, something has changed.

Edith takes the dog, Kitty, down to the towpath and then lets him loose into the meadow. She walks along the footpath towards the narrow inlet further from the road. The police divers drove their vehicles across the field

and the ground is broken up. The dog smells round and round in delighted circles. Here and here and here. He is an old ratter they rescued from a shelter and still sometimes he loses his mind and cannot sleep for hunting or thinking about hunting. She goes closer to the water and looks all about although she does not know what she is searching for. She cannot tell where Ruth went into the water. Is it possible, she thinks, that there are mushrooms which Ruth might have eaten and which caused a hallucination? She is on the edge of the bank now and she turns her eyes to the water and looks at it, looks all along the river, as if she might find the woman. She does not know. She whistles to the dog and starts for home.

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Edith

She watches them from the window of her bedroom. Ruth is there and the boys from next door. They have blown up paddling pools and submerged themselves. Later, when she goes out to tidy them away, there will be circular yellowing imprints on the grass. She sees Ruth's eyes moving towards the house and she steps back into the heat of the room. If Ruth sees her she will be angry and there will be one of those week-long arguments which fill the house and which are unbearable to her. She can hear the sound of their voices but not the words, the click of a tab on a can being opened. She goes to the window and looks out to see if Ruth is drinking beer and this time her movement is too fast and she sees Ruth observing her there.

Ruth and Dylan have dinner at the house. Patrick is at the church but Edith sits with them and they eat pasta and salad and garlic bread. Ruth's hair hangs in damp strings in front of her eyes. Dylan is polite in a slightly derisive way, leaping up and down to help her, his eyes sliding to Ruth as if to share in a secret joke. Mostly Ruth and Dylan talk to one another and ignore her, chewing with their mouths open, bending their heads together and laughing at stories she does not understand. She finds herself not invisible but awfully present, as if positioned accidentally at the same table.

How is your mother? she asks Dylan.

Fine, thanks, he says.

And Ruth – she says, but something about the girl's eyes, lifted, stops her from finishing. Don't worry, she says, don't worry.

Ruth and Dylan talk about his brothers and about things that have happened at school. She listens carefully to them and sometimes interjects or tries to join in although when she does this only Dylan nods, Ruth does not even seem to hear her. More and more this happens, as if Edith were

speaking in a different language and no one can bear to tell her. She finds herself, at the supermarket, at the school, out of breath with panic.

We're going now, Ruth says to the room, and gets up. Dylan swallows in a rush and follows her. They have left their plates. When she picks up Ruth's glass of water it is still warm from the girl's hand. Edith tidies the table and washes the pans, leaves out some food under foil for Patrick to have when he returns. She tries to watch television but she is antsy and keeps going over moments from dinner in her head. She puts on her shoes and walks up towards the bridge. The river is so slow and low. She can hear the noise of loud music from the meadows and there is the smell of smoke. A pair of bikes swing around her, making her jump. It is Ruth and Dylan, cycling side by side, not seeing her, zigzagging down towards the towpath. Before she can counsel herself not to, she calls out after them, not a name but a sound. They do not hear her.

When Ruth comes back from Dylan's in the morning she smells of beer. The clothes she leaves by the washing machine are green with grass stains and there are cigarette butts in the pockets. Edith lines the dog-ends on the kitchen counter, thinking that it will be a wordless message to the girl. What is the message? *I see you. I see you.* She waits for Ruth to come and speak to her but she does not, and when she goes to make dinner later the cigarettes are gone. Patrick is telling a story which Ruth is laughing at. Edith holds her spoon and thinks that she will shout, will have it out with Ruth at the table. Her spoon bumps noisily into the side of her bowl but no one looks over at the sound.

There is no sleep, only the underwear in the washing machine and the cigarettes in their vanished row. She keeps all the lights off and moves around the house, drifting, opening and closing her hands.

She walks up to the school the next day at the time she knows Ruth will be leaving. She is wearing the shoes with the hard heel and it is good to be walking. She is walking towards Ruth. She has not decided yet what she will say to her. To begin with she thought it would be a fight but she is not so sure now. The walking has dulled her anger. She just wants to see Ruth. She wants to see her and talk to her in a way they have not talked, really, since that awful summer seven years ago. She is afraid. She stops and waits to see if the fear will recede. Really, of course, she wants to tell Ruth she

loves her. She does not know if she can say this. Maybe she will say only that she would like to spend time with Ruth, to walk home with her. She is late. She goes on quickly, preparing her face. She comes to the front of the school. There is no one there, perhaps Ruth has gone home a different way. She feels disappointed but also, maybe, relieved; the fear ebbs. She goes down towards the path to return home and sees that there is one car remaining in the car park. It has its headlights on full and in the wide beam there is a figure, lit up enormously. It is Ruth. She is naked from the waist down, there is her bottom, her knees pushed apart, the headlights making it seem as if she were on a stage. She throws something into the trees and as she does Edith can see her face which is laughing. The door of the car opens and a man pulls himself up with one hand and shouts to her. The words do not make it to Edith, she is submerged, there is only the boom of her pulse which goes *QUESTION? QUESTION? QUESTION?* She recognises the man as Marvin, who is no longer at school and must be twenty-six, perhaps even older. Ruth is going towards the car now. Edith must do something, must call out, must put herself forward and stop whatever is happening. Ruth is getting into the car. Edith, lost, clamps her eyes shut and then cries out and opens them again. The headlights are turned off. She stands waiting and waiting and then she cannot wait any longer and she goes down to the street. She runs.

Part Seven

A DAY IN JANUARY

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Leo

There is ice in the air through the open windows. He understands himself to be drunker than he first thought. He pulls over. He goes round and opens the back of the van, wanting to lie down on the floor and finish drinking the beer. He stumbles as he is climbing in, kicking a stack of empty boxes, catching himself with a hand on the back wall. There is a crate here, hidden, and when he examines the label, he finds that it is the missing delivery, mistakenly put in his van that morning. He does not know the time. The river is cold and fast. The island is slipping into the sea.

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Edith

She lies on the bare mattress in Ruth's room. Late afternoon someone tries to get into the house. They use their key and then, when the chain stops them, call in through the gap. Hello? Hello? Is anyone there? This is my house, she thinks, this is my house.

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Part Eight

THE ISLAND AGAIN

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Jupjaapun

The storm hits the east side of the caravan park and tears open the metal fence. The rain comes hard across the roof and leaks in around the windows. Jupjaapun goes out in her waterproof to help rescue the fence from where it has blown across the dual carriageway. She thinks about Ruth and Ori. She was sure they would be home when she got back from work; but they are not.

The argument was a big one. They went outside so as not to wake the children and fought in whispers beside the steps of the caravan. The last year they have bickered often about tidying or money, one of them tired and annoyed and then the other. The caravan is so small that everyone is always on top of one another and there is never enough space to put everything away. Ruth lost her job at the fish and chip shop for coming in late and sometimes not at all. Where have you been going? JP said. What exactly have you been doing? Ruth changed the subject, tried to distract her. JP knew her too well for that; but she did not know why Ruth would not tell her, from the very beginning there have been no secrets between them. The whispers turned to shouts. There were faces in the windows of some of the other caravans, a woman had even come out and was stood in the doorway. JP swore at her and the woman swore back and then retreated.

I don't want Saint here, Ruth said.

Leo and Nora's father had got back in contact the month previously and wanted to see where the children were living. JP has always, somehow, found herself unable to argue with him. I told you, she said, it's just for an hour, probably less.

No, Ruth said, I don't get why you even want to see him.

There was, increasingly, a sense between them of heels dug in on either side and the rope that ran from one to the other pulled so taut surely it would break. What exactly, JP thought in anger and frustration, even held

them together to begin with? Then she remembered the nights in the flat when they took turns holding the baby, or going to Nora when she woke from nightmares, and the mornings they would drink coffee side by side with their heads stuck out of the window, letting the wind wake them up. And then, afterwards, in the big house with the other women. It was love. It was just love. She reached for Ruth now and Ruth let JP take her hands and pull her close.

Bloody hell, JP said.

Bloody hell, Ruth repeated. No Saint in the caravan.

OK. And can you try and get a job you can keep?

Yeah. OK, look.

They turned together. The children were in the window, gazing at them, their noses squashed against the glass. Ruth and JP, together, raise their hands and wave.

In the night JP woke slick with sweat. Something moved in the space beyond the bed. The creak and moan of the floor, the crunch of the door. There was a nightmare that lingered and then released. She slept again before she could get up to see what was happening and, in the morning, when she woke Ruth and Ori were gone.

It is months after that she finds the map in the glovebox. Saint has the children for the day and she is clearing out all of Ruth and Ori's things. She empties the wardrobe and the cupboard under the bed and pulls out the box of cereal that only Ruth ever liked. There are items which are missing and she will not be able to make sense of it until later. The sleeping bags they use as extra layers for very cold nights are gone, the firelighters are not in the tin, her yellow waterproof mac is missing. She climbs into the front seat and tugs down the postcards Ruth stuck up over the windscreen when they first moved in. The glove compartment is a mess of old garage receipts and scrawled reminders in Ruth's handwriting to *get Ori new underwear, maybe get eyes tested, tell Jupjaapun ...* she cannot read the final words of this last one. Tell Jupjaapun what? No one but Ruth ever calls her by her full name. She pulls out the bits of paper and puts them into the binbag, nearly takes the packet of cigarettes Ruth has hidden there and throws it out too and then reconsiders, puts them back, snaps the glovebox shut.

She comes back later with a cup of coffee and rolls the window down. Soon the children will be home. Lately Leo has been shouting a lot, his jaw clenched with some unbidden rage she cannot seem to get through, his eyes wet. Nora is the opposite; soft and boneless in her arms. She opens the glove compartment and looks at the cigarette packet and then closes it again. They quit together, years ago, egging one another on, slapping the nicotine patches onto one another's arms. When had Ruth started again and what else did she not tell her? She gets the cigarettes out and lights one, exhales out of the window. From her position she can see that there is something left in the compartment, wedged against the side so that she has to get her fingers underneath to pull it out. It is a book, bent and nearly torn along the seams. It is a map. When she flicks through she finds Ruth's handwriting in the margins in pencil. *Bus runs at ... need to find a boat ... and a tent ...* She knows what she will see before she finds it and has a terrible feeling of having missed something that was right in front of her. She is a child and has forgotten to go to the bathroom and her legs are wet. She is waiting at home for Saint to come back, he has only gone to the shop, and she knows, with a sinking sense, holding the baby, that he is not returning. There is a page covered in so much handwriting that to begin with it is difficult to make out where the sea starts and the land ends. The ash from the cigarette drops onto her leg and singes her trousers. She bats it away. Slaps the map down onto the passenger seat. She had thought that Ruth left because of their argument, she has not looked for her because she thought that Ruth would come back if she wanted. Except, there, the raggedy edge of the coast, the estuary where the river widens out into the sea, and, a thumbs-width in, circled in red: an island.

In the big house JP and Ruth and the children slept on mattresses on the floor of one of the tall-ceilinged rooms. Often the students who lived above would play music late into the night or throw their empty bottles out of the attic windows so they smashed on the ground. The children slept. She and Ruth stayed awake and said to one another, now we must sleep, no, really, now we must sleep. But they couldn't. There was still so much to say, a torrent, their faces close together, their voices muffled. They told one another everything that had ever happened and JP talked about what she wanted to do when the children were older and what job she would one day like and her hopes, but Ruth – all Ruth really talked about was the island.

Yes, JP found herself breathing, they would go there, they would live there. In the day she sometimes regretted her agreement and then was soothed in believing that really, it would never happen. It was a story that Ruth told over and over, it was not real. When the men came and threw them out of the house, they moved around the city a lot. They slept in hostels and on the sofas of friends, they took the children to the swimming pool to wash their hair and eat the cheap sandwiches they sold from the hatch café and Ruth, breathlessly, talked about the island. All we can do, JP thought in those days, step by step; all we can do is survive. Except Ruth kept talking about the chickens they would keep and maybe, even, the bees. She wrote lists which she gave to JP folded up, like love notes, of all the things they would need to get before they went. One evening, in a booth at a café – Ori and Nora underneath the table in whispering conference, Leo staring out of the window with his lips moving soundlessly, baked beans dripping from his spoon – Ruth would not stop. She had the wind behind her, she was a boat with a sail. JP felt the words crashing over the top of her head, she couldn't breathe. Leo was looking at her.

I cannot, JP said. No, she was shouting; the girls had frozen beneath the table, people had turned to look. She tried to lower her voice but was somehow not in control of its volume. I cannot hear this anymore, she said.

After that Ruth did not talk to her about it again. JP got a heads-up about the caravan from someone at work and they moved in. It was better. The children made friends, she and Ruth talked about the daily admin of meals and jobs and at the weekends they went swimming or to the park. JP forgot. Ruth did not.

She leaves the children with a neighbour and then goes to the dock. It is very difficult to get a boat. She asks everyone she sees but no one wants to take her. The concrete is white-chipped with bird mess and slick with fish scales, the tide is low and the boats lilt ungainly on the wet sand. Little black birds whose name she does not know hop around the dunes. There are bruises on her stomach from that morning. Nora stood silent and panicked while JP wrestled with Leo, trying to get him out of the caravan. Her ears rang from his yells. He had been yelling, it felt to her, since Ori and Ruth left. What are you going to do? he kept shouting. He kicked her so hard she felt the breath whoosh out of her. Outside the neighbour's house she looked down at his arm and saw her fingerprints around his wrist.

She pays a fisherman £20 to take her over. It is not the same person who previously brought Min to the island. The sea is flat. What had she imagined of this place? Not the wind, certainly, which even in early June is sharp, and not the harshness of the rock, which covers everything, and not the stink of bird shit, and not the difficulty in finding a way up off the beach. She calls Ruth's name and the wind takes it almost right out of her mouth. She calls for Ori. She walks hard, not knowing where she is going. With every step she thinks that they are OK and with every step she thinks that something has happened. Something has happened. It has been two months, more. Is it possible they are still here? Ahead she sees the bent-headed trees of the clearing which Ruth once told her about, the exclamation mark of the lighthouse. She picks up speed and goes down a slight dip in the rock and as the wind drops she hears a sound for the first time, a clear noise that lifts her with joy. Are you mad, she will say to Ruth, why didn't you tell me, you can tell me anything. It is the sound of knocking, as Ori always used to make, even in her sleep. She shouts out the girl's name and goes at a run down the slope. The lighthouse is a grim kraken figure with a blackened base and she knows, seeing the island, the truth, which is that they could never have lived here. The clearing is empty. The inside of the lighthouse smells of animals, no one answers her when she calls out, no one is there. Outside in the clearing the sound is still going on, as if Ori is hiding. She stands still and looks around. From above, a scurry of movement, and a flash of something falling hard onto the ground. When she looks she sees an oystercatcher, the jet-black shoulders and bared white belly, the orange beak, one and then another and another, their beaks parting to drop the sea snails down onto the ground to break them open.

Ori

She is a child alone in the hospital. White-paper snow falls onto the bed where she lies. The snow – which she understands is not real – has a muffling effect so that it is almost impossible to hear what anyone is saying to her. The snow piles in drifts against the walls and covers the windows and coats her almost entirely so that her legs and arms become so heavy. The hospital is the body of a vast animal, breathing and churning. The nurse with the familiar face comes back and speaks to her, checks her pulse.

Is this hurting? she asks, pointing to the tubes that enter the top of Ori's hand.

She nods and at the nurse's expression can tell she is surprised.

Can you hear me today? the nurse says.

She nods again. The nurse sits on the edge of the bed and asks her a series of questions. *Do you know where you are?* Yes. *Where are you?* At the hospital. *Do you know where you were found?* No. *Do you know your name?* No. *Do you know where you live?* No. *Do you know what your father's name is?* No. *Do you know what your mother's name is?* No. *Do you know the name of anyone in your family?* No. *Do you know how you got to the island?* The island? *Do you know who found you?* At this last question she discovers that she retains the feeling of being carried, arms looped under her knees and around her back. I don't know, she says.

The next day the nurse takes her to the window of the room and points out to the car park. There is a dirty white camper van parked there and a man sat on the steps, drinking from a cup. His name, the nurse tells her, is Min.

Antibiotics and doctors coming and going. She waits for something, anything, anything, to return to her. At times she feels so close, as if what she has forgotten is only the other side of a tissue door. Mostly, though, the expanse of what she does not know is enormous. The nurse comes and eats

her lunch on the chair at the end of the bed and they watch television together. There is a show on early in the morning that both she and the nurse like. In the show two children walk through a green wood and say the names of everything they see out loud. At the start of the episode everything they see is ordinary. They say the names of the trees: cedar tree, oak tree, birch tree. They see a squirrel eating a nut and an owl sleeping. As the episode goes on the children start seeing more and more strange and unusual things. They say the names of the trees: marshmallow tree, fish tree, honey tree. This is the point of the show that both she and the nurse really like because it makes them laugh. One morning the children are walking through the wood. They see a balloon in the shape of a banana, they see a flamingo on a branch and then they see a bear. The bear is brown with a long gentle snout and soft eyes and seeing it she realises that she knows her name.

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Min

He waits for days in the car park at the hospital and gets information from the one nurse who will give it to him. The girl is still sleeping, she is recovering from hunger and dehydration and the cold, she is awake but can remember very little. It is never really dark at the hospital. In the night the lights from the ambulances pass across the ceiling of his van. Sometimes in the day, for something to do, he will go and stand beside the car park ticket machines and help anyone who can't figure out the complicated system. In the day the car park is rammed, the aisles filled with abandoned vehicles. He has spent so much money on parking but he cannot leave. He cannot leave her. At times he finds his arms are full. He is still holding her. He remembers so exactly the weight, the loll of her head.

Part Nine

LOST BEAR HARE MOTHER

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Ori

The camper van is a white Sprinter with a leaky sunroof. There's an Aretha Franklin CD stuck in the player and the windscreen wipers don't work. Occasionally Min has a dog, or a couple of dogs, strays or fosters between homes; and so the inside of the van stinks of wet animal, everything coated in a layer of hair. Cats hide beneath the driver's seat while Ori tries to lure them out with peanut butter fingers. It does not strike her until later that she is another of these strays, found, adopted, taken along for the ride. This is before they settle down and stop moving, the job at the university, the house with the notched door frame showing Ori's increasing height. This is before Eva in the night-time hallway, the ticking of the shiny grandfather clock, Ori's ghostly, forgotten family like intruders somewhere in the back of the house.

In the camper van they never stay anywhere for more than three or four days. In the far corner, against the panelled wall and above the bed, Min tacks up a platform which has enough room for her to sleep curled up. For a bit, a small dog called Pie sleeps there too, a Jack Russell, sprawled over her, nose to nose, before Min drops him off at a shelter. For a long time, she waits for the moment when Min will drive them to a shelter where she too will be dropped off; but it does not come and eventually the camper van is sold to a student forced out of accommodation by high rental prices and they move to a house.

That first year, however, they circle the coastline. The camper van becomes gritty with a fine layer of sand and her hands get cut by marram grass. Min is writing a book about coastal hares. He makes noodles with packet stir-fry sauce, cheese toasties flipped in the rusted frying pan, beans scooped straight from the tin with one of the two spoons. Even in the rain – the Devonshire downpours, the Scottish mizzle – he is outside in the dawn, knocking out the coffee grounds, lacing up his boots on the step. He writes

notes on A3 paper and buys her a pack of brightly coloured pens, lets her draw on the pages. She draws the hares he tells her stories about; she draws what she can remember: the clearing and the lighthouse, the figure coming through the trees. When Min found her on the island she was clutching a pair of stones and he had kept them, given them to her later when she was well enough. She keeps them now, holds them. They are only stones but they are all she has from before. Sometimes she puts them on the paper and – thinking that might be what they are for – draws around them.

He has the femur of a hare on the dashboard of the van and the scut of another stuck up over the little gas ring. He tells her about their vulnerability, how they have their homes outside of the earth and so are never resting, are always looking out for danger. He tells her about how they fight, that he has seen a hare going for the throat of a fox or leaping a good five feet off the ground to attack a buzzard. He calls her little hare.

One day they see a hare with two leverets, tucked down into its shallow form, feeding. The hare sights them before they do her. Min holds up his hand and they freeze. Ori's chest burns with trying not to breathe. The hare has risen onto her back legs. They are close enough that Ori can see the wind moving the paler hair on her belly and the small babies drawing air in and out. None of them move. The way that the hare is standing – her belly revealed, her chin turned – makes her seem very human. The sight of the hare seems to tug at the mess of disorganised wool in Ori's brain and she thinks: it is my mother; my mother has come back. She finds herself breaking out of stillness, screaming and running forward. The hare freezes and then comes for her like a dart, the babies laid low on the ground behind her, her teeth bared. Min moves faster than she has ever seen him move, scooping her out of the way and running with her in his arms while she flails and tries to get away from him.

Back at the van he heats milk in a pan, adds powdered cocoa, pours it into one of the metal cups that hang from the back door on a hook.

Here, he says, and then: are you with me?

She nods.

He sits beside her. He has spoken to her about finding somewhere for them to live, a house, a school. She feels cold at these tendril roots, holding them in place. She holds the cup until it burns her hands.

Did you remember something? he says.

She shrugs.

Can you try and think?

She thinks about the hare. There was a moment of clarity at the sight of it, like air through an open window. A mother, was that it, the hint of a mother? It is gone now. She shakes her head. She feels frustrated and sees, before he can close the look down, that Min is experiencing the same emotion. She closes her eyes and she tries and tries and tries but everything is shut and there is nothing there.

Maybe we should go back to the island, she says in the way she has done before. All she remembers of it is the smell of salt water, but Min has told her – in the hope, she thinks, of nudging other memories awake – about the clearing where he found her, about the lighthouse.

I don't think it's a good idea. I went back when you were in the hospital, only a day or two after I found you. I searched everywhere, all over. I waited for someone to come looking for you. There must have been someone there with you, there was a tent and someone had made a fire, but there was no one. I'm sorry.

Ori

Shoes with a silver buckle, Min's all-thumb-fingers plaiting her hair. At playtime she hunches in a corner of the concrete yard while brown birds hunt for worms in the mud. Behind her the other kids run and play with long ropes. When she turns back, stiffly, they are watching her and in the yellow room all morning they have examined her. The classroom has low tables and straight-backed plastic chairs, there are baby chicks with soft yellow fuzz hatched in a glass cage and a tray of sand and toys to pour the sand. They write their letters over and over, following the little dotted lines, and she is no good at this, has never been any good at this and all morning she wants to go outside. All morning, she sees the change of light moving from one side of the playground to the other, filling and then extinguishing the windows, and she wants to go out and run with her legs and she does not want to sit on the plastic chairs and eat the carefully chopped chunks of apple and drink the water from the blue plastic cups and lift the sand up and down and do her letters. Finally, they put on their coats and their shoes and they go out. The air smells like stone and rain. She runs in rings around and around and around the concrete yard, going so fast that everything blurs and it takes her some time to realise that the teacher and the assistant have come into the doorway to stare and the other children have stopped their games to observe her. She slows at the corner and turns her back, watches the fearless birds hunt for worms, and she waits for the day to be over. No one speaks to her. She learns their names through listening to the blonde teacher say them. They are strange creatures, or she is a strange creature. Yes. Staring into the cage at the fluffed-up, glassy-eyed chicks she knows that she is the strange, family-less creature. She reaches down and scoops one up and holds it. Between her cupped palms its heart thunders and its gangly snake-feet shift.

Oh no, the teacher says. Mrs Locke. That's her name. Oh no, we don't pick up the little chicks on our own. Pop him back down.

She lets the chick loose and he hustles back to the others and presses into them. There are rules like this. She tries and tries to get them. She wants to do it right. She wants to do it right for Min and for whoever was with her on the island who surely, whatever Min says, will come back for her. But the rules are tricky and everyone already knows them and she should, she sees, already know them too. The rule of not picking up the chicks without someone telling you that it is OK to do so. The rule of not eating unless it is time to eat. The rule of not playing in the sand or paint unless someone has asked you to. The rule of hanging your coat upon one of the little metal pegs and the rule of sitting and listening to stories and the rule of not shouting. She needs the toilet. All morning and into the break she needs the toilet. She identifies, by watching, that the place to go is through the big brown door and out into the corridor. Children go through there and then come back and wash their hands at the sink. She waits and waits to try to understand what to do but she needs to go very badly and cannot figure it out. She goes to the door and tries to open it but there is a catch, a thin metal loop, up high, holding it closed. Mrs Locke is with the other children; they are doing their letters again. She pushes over one of the small plastic chairs so that its back rests against the door and she climbs up onto it and manages to get the hook undone. She gets down and pulls the chair away from the door and the door swings open and in the corridor Ori can see the entrance to the toilets. Mrs Locke sees her and comes over quickly and takes her by the arm to pull her back.

Where are you going, Ori? She says Ori's name loudly and she smiles even as she holds Ori's arm quite tightly. It isn't the end of the day yet, she says. We have to stay here until your daddy comes to get you.

What, Ori thinks, does this woman know about Min? What does this woman know about the island where Ori came from?

I need – Ori says.

Mrs Locke looks at her, waits. She has closed the door and secured it with the latch. Ori wants to ask to go the toilet, but she does not know how to ask. She has missed the lesson on how to go about this.

Fine, Mrs Locke says, let's go and do some drawing now. She leads Ori back to one of the round pale tables. The children there are drawing monotonously, their fists moving rhythmically across the paper, their eyes swivelling upwards to look at Ori as Mrs Locke guides her into the chair. Ori sits. She cannot draw. She needs the toilet too much to draw. She gets

up and goes back to the door and takes the handle and pulls savagely at it. Mrs Locke is calling, loudly, behind her. She pulls at the door hard and the latch breaks above her and the door slams open. Mrs Locke is holding her by the shoulders. Ori's mouth is filled with springy green moss and all she wants is to –

When the urine comes it is hot and urgent. It soaks her legs immediately, the uncomfortable thick tights, and soaks also, with its pressure, Mrs Locke's shoes. The puddle on the floor is wide and yellow and spreads. She closes her eyes and lets it come, an enormous release, almost joyful. When she turns upwards and opens her eyes, it is done, Mrs Locke's face is unsmiling for the first time all day, a little bit of tooth showing. The teacher's assistant is there with paper towels, handfuls dropped down and instantly soaked. Mrs Locke is steering her away. The squelch of both their shoes, the warmth of the soggy tights clamping between her legs. In the bathroom Mrs Locke bends and takes off the tights and then the skirt. Mrs Locke is trying to take the drenched clothes away but Ori does not want her to. She tugs at the skirt and Mrs Locke tugs back and Ori snarls at her, baring her teeth. Mrs Locke backs off, leaves her, naked from the waist down. The door to the classroom has been left open and some of the children, free-range for the first time all day, have edged up to look out. She experiences a sudden awareness of her own bared body, a judder of shame, and inches out of view around the side of the cubicle wall, hands pressed down to cover herself.

Min is late. The children wait on the brightly coloured mats and their parents come one by one. Mostly their mothers, bustling in, calling to them, gathering up the drawings and rucksacks. She sees one of the mothers staring at her, a woman with a wide-brimmed hat and a clutch of bracelets on her wrists, her daughter tugging impatiently for them to leave.

When everyone is gone she cleans out the chicken cage with Mrs Locke. Mrs Locke lets her hold the chicks as they put them back in and she feels again the desperate thrum of their hearts which is like the phrase *I exist, I exist, I exist*. She wants to cry for the day. For the shame of the urine and the endless mistaken rules and for her running around the playground without thinking what she would look like.

Min is there, finally, apologetic, rushing in, knocking his knees against the entrance gate.

Ori, would you mind going and washing your hands first, I just need to speak to your dad, Mrs Locke says.

Ori stands at the sink and lets the water run cold onto her flattened palms. She understands that Mrs Locke is narrating her great list of mistakes and failures. Min comes and takes her hand and they go down the street to the van.

It is decided that Ori will have a playdate with one of the other children at school. The event comes about with no input from her. They are going, Min tells her on Saturday morning, to Eva's house. Eva. Ori has a shadowy sense of her, another face among the children's, a blonde bobbing head running across the playground, a fist clutching a pencil at the drawing table.

They drive to the city and go along the street and turn into a quiet road of big houses with high gates and elm trees pushing up the pavements.

Can you find number 12 for me? he says. She counts the numbers on the doors out loud for him.

There it is, he says, finally.

The house is a beautiful green with an orange door and a knocker in the shape of a fox. There is someone working in the front garden, bent and kneading at the ground, tugging up weeds from the manicured flower beds and putting them into a silver wheelbarrow. When Min lets the golden knocker fall, it makes a determined sound. Ori wonders if someone she knew from before will open the door. Then she is certain. This is what will happen. Her mother will open the door of the beautiful house and they will go inside and stay there together forever. When she raises her arms Min bends and picks her up. They wait. There is the sound of the secateurs in the garden behind them, clipping the hedge. The door opens. The woman is wearing lilac running clothes. Behind her Eva skids across the wide hallway on her socked feet and comes to rest at the door.

We're going to be trains, she says to Ori. We're going to be Ivor the Engines and Thomas the Tank Engines. We're going to be knights. We're going to be pirates. We are going to be highwaymen and steal all of the sweeties.

Hold on there, the woman, Karensa, says. Hold your horses, lets get them through the door before we start barking orders.

Thank you for this, Min says.

No problem, Karensa says. Can you stay for a coffee?

I should get going, Min says. He has put Ori down and, when she turns, she sees that he is already five paces away, one shoulder leading the rest of him. Karensa is closing the door and the view of Min is narrowing and narrowing and then so small and then over. Eva is running around and around the room, shouting things Ori doesn't understand, frowning and smiling, elongating her jaw, throwing her arms back and forth.

Enough, Eva, Karensa says, that's too much right now. Can't you see that Ori thinks you are completely wild and untrained. Let's just start with a snack.

They eat yellow puffy crisps in plastic bowls on the sofa in front of the TV, watching a film that Eva knows all the words to, elaborately mimicking the dance moves. Ori loves the bright colours and the way that the crisps melt on her tongue and she loves Eva's raucous voice belting out the lines in such a way that it is impossible to hear the words. Eva shows her how to hang upside down off the sofa, all the blood rushing in a boom to the top of her skull and pulsing there. She is struck, upside down, by the fact of Min's departure and she lets herself slide off the high, plump sofa onto the soft carpet. Underneath the sofa there is a drift of dust and ancient crumbs. Eva does not notice her. She is spinning on the spot, so fast that she must soon be sick from the motion, her arms tucked tight to her body, her breath gasping. Ori can hear Karensa on the telephone in the kitchen. Ori goes the other way out of the room and back into the hallway. There is a giant clock on one wall, steadily ticking, and the stairs are wood, curving away, and the whole place is quiet as a cave. She walks to the door and tries the handle but it is locked. She can hear Eva starting to sing again in the sitting room and Karensa laughing on the phone. She goes up the stairs. In the hallway above there are many closed doors and some that stand open. Bedrooms with pristine white beds and fat pillows, a pink bathroom with folded hand towels. Through an open door she finds a room that must belong to Eva. There is a white filmy veil covering the bed and the ceiling is painted with trailing vines. There is a rocking horse on a wooden runner with a red mouth and grey eyes. One wall is all mirrors and there is a large dollhouse with ivy covering the red roof and perfect miniature furniture. Ori bends and takes out some of the little figures, red circles painted on their cheeks, with tiny wooden shoes and fabric aprons. One that must be Eva with a blue lacy dress and a tiara no bigger than Ori's fingernail. In the kitchen of the house the figure of the mother bends forcefully at the waist to retrieve

something from the double-doored oven, and in a room with leather chairs and a real electric lamp on the table a man sits straight-backed and types on an elaborate typewriter. She tries to put the Eva figure into the matching bedroom on the top floor of the house but she is clumsy, her fingers are too large or too cold and she upends the figure and the wicker rocking chair. She feels very tired. Like she has walked for ten days. She picks up the figure of the mother and twists her to examine the face and she hopes it does not look like her lost mother; the eyes unfocused, the smile rictus, the hair tamped down in waves. The tiredness bleeds and fuzzes her vision. She does not make it to the veil-covered bed. The rug is sheepskin, so soft against her cheek, the whole of her sinking down.

When she wakes Eva's face is very close to hers.

What are you doing? Eva says.

Nothing.

Someone has lifted her from the floor onto the bed. Eva brings with her the smell of caramelised sugar and has calmed, comes now with an adult coolness, her sticky arms crossed beneath her flat chest.

You slept through dinner, she says. Come on.

Ori gets up and follows her out. Eva is in pyjamas and the house is very quiet. It is late. When Ori looks down, she sees that she is wearing pyjamas too, matching Eva's, starched. Someone has changed her while she slept. She follows Eva down the stairs and to the hallway below. Eva wants to play with her parents' things, objects of power, meaningless to Ori; wants to get the bottles out of the wooden cabinet in the white-carpeted sitting room and smell them, wants to take the thin tea set from the cupboard and make towers with it.

No, Ori says, stern with certainty. Eva stops. I have a game, Ori says.

It is, very occasionally, this way. She will be certain and the memory will be there, as if all she needed to do was stop looking for it. Yes, she thinks, it's a game we used to play at the swimming pool, it's the knocking game. There are ornamental stones at the base of one of the tall palms potted at the foot of the stairs, weird shiny grey rocks, unnatural. They are nothing like her perfect island stones but she takes a handful of them. There is a wool scarf protruding from a coat pocket near the door, which she pulls out and ties around her own eyes first and then stands frozen, legs spread, arms already outstretched. She can feel the tightness of Eva's pyjamas around her

throat and ankles, the stones are sweating in her palm. Eva is unserious, muffled giggles giving away her position, the stones already clanking in her hand.

I tap, Ori says, and does so twice, knocking the stones together. Like this. You see? And then you have to tap, like you're answering me. Do you get it?

It's not difficult, Eva says.

Do you want to play? Ori says, and then loathes her own whine. Let's play, come on.

It is almost like calling them there, she thinks, like calling whoever cared for her before the island, before Min. She can see nothing with the blindfold on. Her breath dampens it and her heart thuds thuds and she knocks the stones again and for a moment is certain that, from the blindness, there will come Eva's answer and then another, behind her, deeper in the house.

She knocks and Eva answers; she moves quickly, picturing the hallway, the polished wooden table, the mirror, and catches Eva almost immediately, grabbing her with both hands so that Eva squeals and then quiets herself and tugs loose.

You can see, Eva says.

No, Ori says.

The blindfold is pulled off her. She blinks. Eva is frowning.

Put it on me, you can see.

Ori goes behind her, ties it around her head, tighter than necessary, pulling the ends hard. Eva doesn't comment.

I'll do it, she says, and stands a little mockingly, bent forward, head turned to one side. Like this. Are you ready?

You don't need to say *are you ready*, Ori says. That's what the stones mean.

Whatever, Eva says, and raps the stones together loudly, three times and then another, turning her head back and forth, her tongue lolling. Ori answers, and as she does, moves, exiting the spot as Eva comes forward, arms grasping, so that Eva's hands close on nothing and Ori is already gone. They keep playing. Eva loses her mocking air and gets silently competitive and Ori won't let her win, but plays also with a thrill of her mother, her blank-faced mother, somewhere in the quiet house, listening, about to answer almost at the same moment as she answers, the two of them knocking together, *I am here, I am here*. Eva cannot catch Ori. Again and

again Ori slips from her, just out of reach, and again Eva knocks and comes forward and Ori knocks and twists away. They play until they are out of breath and then Ori puts on the blindfold. Her eyes have been staring and wide and behind the soft scarf they ache a little. She takes her time, holding the stones, listening to the sounds of the house. She can hear Eva breathing and shifting her weight, can already almost exactly locate her. She taps the stones together and Eva, very quickly, taps too and Ori moves, reaching out, confident, feeling her wide grin. Except her hands close on nothing, clapping with the force of bringing them together. She stumbles, stops. Somewhere to the side she feels motion, spins, reaches. Nothing again. She taps the stones together and the reply comes, in a different direction, further off, but still reachable if she moves quickly which she does, darting forward, arms closing once more on nothing. On nothing. The next time she smacks into the wall, she cannot even tell which one, the hard edge of a door frame thwacking her face, her closed fist. She billows around, trying to find her way, wincing. She rings out the stones again and Eva answers again, and again is not there when Ori comes for her. She has wised up. She has learned the game. The stones in Ori's hand say *I am here I am here* and Eva's reply comes. Listening to the reply Ori understands that though the stones in her own hands speak *I am here* – and she had presumed the stones of the fleeing player spoke the same way – in actual fact the other stones say something entirely different. *I am gone*, they say, *I am gone*, *I am not coming back*. She begins to cry. It comes like a wave and breaks over her and she bends and sobs and holds herself.

What's wrong with you? Eva says. What's wrong?

Ori holds the stones and knocks them and, automatically, Eva replies and Ori hears it again, the truth of that reply. She holds herself and tries to stop crying but cannot.

Above them, in the hallway, footsteps. She straightens, blazes with relief. Footsteps and then a figure leaning over the banister, the face not quite clear because of the light behind her.

Eva, for goodness' sake, Karensa says. Karensa comes down the stairs, holding a dressing gown around her, her hair plaited tight against her head. I am so tired of this monkey behaviour, Karensa says, I cannot believe you are not both in bed.

Eva is staring at Ori and then Karensa is staring too.

What did you do? Karensa says to Eva.

Nothing, Eva says.

Ori finds she cannot stop crying. Can this be true? Her mother will never come back.

They drive around. She dozes, listens to music, wakes to the rattle-knock rattle-knock of the cat's eyes beneath the van's wheels. They eat cheesy crisps and drink Pepsi on the roof of the van in service stations. They hunt the country's hares, up and down, occasionally catching sight of one the colour of snow, fleeing across the black fields.

The black fields in the fen and a little, battered house with a red tiled roof and a chimney clogged with ten years of birds' nests and feathers. The camper van on chocks in the front garden, slowly sinking into the mud. She goes down to the quick river at the bottom of the garden, buries her toes in the mud, hunts for dragonflies and tadpoles, makes dams with stones and branches. When she's tired, she clips back the sagging plastic door of the camper van and climbs up the step, makes herself comfortable on the bench chair among the mildewed blankets. She drinks chocolate milk and draws on paper stolen from Min's desk, gnawing at the pencils, her tongue coloured grey. To begin with she just draws the hares, especially the white one that Min talks about seeing on the island. The white hare is bigger than the others, with strong motoring back legs and enormously long pointed ears. Sometimes she is the size of the flat, wind-harassed trees and sometimes she is even bigger, the size of the little house where she and Min have washed up. After a while she starts drawing other things too. She draws Min, the old pair of faded overalls he wears for weeks at a time, his holey boots and rumpled hair, and she draws herself, smaller than in reality, hiding underneath the kitchen sink, behind the sofa, inside the camper van.

Min gets a job at the university in a town nearby and she goes to school. Sometimes she gets in fights with the other children who wait for her at the bus stop, mock the way she talks, ask where her mother is. To this question, every time, she replies something different: she is dead, she is waiting at home, she is famous and lives in Paris. Ori eats her lunch in the library, starts bringing her paper and pens from home and drawing there, leaning on the sticky tables. Sometimes in the process of drawing there is illumination: the rocking of a boat beneath her, the splash of bathwater flowing over the edge of a tub filled with naked giggling bodies, the smell of her mother's hair.

After school Min is waiting for her outside the gate, standing a little aside from all the other parents, hands in his pockets, chin tipped back, in his own world. She takes his hand and they walk the long way home.

When she is thirteen, he starts going away for a couple of nights at a time for work, for conferences or fieldwork. She used to go everywhere with him, help put up the tent and start the campfire, unzip her yellow lion bag and draw at the back of the lecture theatre. More and more, she stays at home. She reheats the vegan bolognese he's left, sets herself up on the rug in front of the TV, handfuls of pens and pencils scattered around, spaghetti dropping from her plate. She puts on dramas he won't let her see when he's home, *The Bill*, *Casualty*, and sometimes whatever late-night horror film is on, freaking herself out. She warms up milk in the microwave, adds chocolate powder and little marshmallows. It is nights like this, on the edge of fear, listening to the knock of the magpies building nests on the roof, that she starts adding words to the drawings. She's never been very good with words. Her spelling is bad and the English teacher has a vendetta against her handwriting, unreadable, sometimes the words coming out backwards or upside down. Still. She can read them, fisted hand around the pen, belly down on the rug, writing. The giant hare with the swivelling ears that leaps across the roof of the camper van, the thud of its paws taking off, and then is gone. The years of living out of the van and travelling around the country, the crinkled A-Z road map flung onto the dashboard, the tin opener grimy with dog food, clicking open another can for whichever stray they'd found on the way. Looking for the giant hare in the echoey swimming pool at the school, down by the river where she goes alone to hunt for jellied tadpoles and swim.

Jupjaapun

A forty-four-tonne lorry going at sixty through the pitch black of a lightless, foggy road takes a long time to stop. M1, M6, M25, M4, M62; A1, A14, A34; fried chicken at Little Chef at four in the morning, black coffee and a cheese sandwich under the spill of diesel fumes and fluorescence; Dartford Crossing, Humber Bridge, Severn Bridge, Prince of Wales Bridge, Forth Road Bridge, Tay Road Bridge, Mersey Gateway Bridge, Tamar Bridge, Kessock Bridge; broken showers at the Lancaster services, quick wash with a bottle of water, the click, click, click of the indicator and the bump of the cat's eyes beneath the wheels; last drop of the week and heading towards home.

She's picked up extra runs and been away for nearly two weeks at a go, catching shut-eye in lay-bys and car parks along the way, eating dinner on the metal step of the big red lorry to try to wake herself up, watching the brake lights on the far-side motorway. The days and the nights have flipped and when it gets light and she hits her max nine hours of going she pulls over, puts up the blind, is asleep almost before she lies down. She gets the plastic bag of flyers she printed off at the library near home out of the cab of the lorry. She's been carting them around and they are nearly all gone. Soon she will be back and she can print off some more. Sometimes as she drives away the wind will catch them out from under the windshield wipers of the parked cars and throw them across the road. She goes into the petrol station and asks if she can put one in their window. The woman behind the till shrugs, doesn't look up. She sticks it facing outwards towards the forecourt and gives out another couple to drivers filling up their cars.

Who's this? a man says, holding it.

My friend, she says, her daughter.

I haven't seen them, he says, and tries to give it back to her.

Pass it on then, she says, and goes back to the lorry, climbs inside, warms her hands on the heater. She pulls onto the motorway and sits in the slow lane, traffic ebbing and flowing, the variable speed limits going up and down, lane hoppers in sleek four-by-fours, blue flashing sirens in the mirrors. She toggles the volume on the CB radio, holds down the button and speaks into the mic.

Breaker 1/9, she says, this is Lost Bear, anyone got ears?

She waits for a beat and then tries again. Someone comes over the airwaves, static and then a voice.

How's it going LB, I hear you. The voice is a man's, an accent she cannot place.

Good to talk. What's the traffic like heading eastbound where you are? she says, and waits.

It's bad and getting worse. I'm at junction 4.

I'm behind you. You have a moment to hear about someone I'm looking for?

There's a longer pause and then a beep. I hear you.

I'm looking for my friend and her daughter, went missing a while ago, JP says into the mic. They're called Ruth and Ori. She's twenty-six now and the little girl is nine nearly ten, though she might look younger. She reads the description of them that she's written up on the dashboard and then waits.

The voice comes back, I read you. You're still looking?

She sits back in the seat for a moment before she replies. I've spoken to you before?

Years ago. I haven't seen them though. How long have you been searching?

Three years. OK. 10-4. See you.

The radio goes quiet. She leaves it on as she drives. The roads seem to go on forever today, the distance back to the children is so long. She is impatient to be home but knows better than to watch the clock; sometimes she's certain it goes backwards under her gaze. When she's travelling she checks in at service stations where there's Wi-Fi, sends emails to an account she set up for Leo and reads the replies. *Bonjour Mama, I've got so much French homework I'll be fluent by the time you're back, can you bring home mint cake / No news Mama except that Nora brought that cat in again and it left half a mouse on your bed / Mama, Susie says she can't help out next*

week but it's cool I'm fine without her. She sends instructions, mostly, because she doesn't know what else to say. *Eat your veggies, don't annoy Susie, go to bed early and don't watch loads of crap TV.* Sometimes she wakes up so confused on the little bed in the bunk of the lorry, hands out, grasping at nothing. She is in the caravan, Nora is sprawled next to her, Leo is out late with friends and just got back, letting all the cold air in. No. She is away, she is hundreds of miles away, she is storming through the night to try to get back to them.

She is getting close to the zone where she might be able to pick up Nora if the atmosphere is playing ball. She twitches the CB radio even louder and listens out. They got the radio that first year when she started the haulage job. The arcade work could barely cover the rent and bills on the caravan, as well as their food, and without Ruth's income everything was tight. The trucker job was well paid, comparatively, and there was a woman who lived a caravan over who would keep an eye on the children. It was only supposed to be for a year or so, just to build up some funds, just until they found Ruth or Ruth came back or they figured out another plan. Susie came over at night and the kids got the bus to and from school. Susie had a pack of ex-race whippets that lived in a run out the back of the caravan and Nora and Leo would help walk and feed them. Leo was twelve and didn't seem to mind when JP went away but Nora hated it, had nightmares and fought at school and would only sleep if Susie brought over the smallest of the whippets, a one-eyed sandy dog with nervous teeth he would wrap gently around Nora's wrist while she slept. One weekend, home for a stint, JP and Nora found the old radio in a charity shop and fixed it, set it up on the table. Nora so excited that her feet kept leaving the floor. Coming home at night JP would find Nora in bed with the dog and the radio, Leo AWOL as per, channel 19 on loud; static and the occasional burst of trucker gossip: wet roads, closed bridges, breakdowns. When they first found the radio, Nora would send out her signal with words:

Come in Lost Bear, this is Little Home.

And for JP, driving and driving, the sudden interjection of that voice, coming into range, reaching out for her, was amazing.

This is Lost Bear. Nearly Home 20, Little Home. Coming for you.

Except then, about a year after Nora started using the radio, JP met someone. She was smoking a bummed cigarette outside of a motorway service station and having blank thoughts about yellow dashed roads and

traffic lights when someone sidled up to join her. She recognised him a little, they must have done the same routes, crossed paths. He had tight jeans and a shaved back and sides, clean fingernails.

Do you have another? he said.

I stole this one, she said.

I see. You been far?

Yeah. And you?

Not far this time. You nearly home?

That's right. Sailing closer now.

I'm Red Dog, he said, and offered a hand. She shook it.

Lost Bear, she said and felt a tension along the length of his hand.

What's up?

They were standing near a metal bin and he closed his hand and rapped on the top of the bin three times, making a hollow knocking sound.

That's you, right? he said.

I don't get it, she said.

Really? Lost Bear?

Yeah.

He did it again, his chin jutted out, eyes widened. Yeah?

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

Your daughter. Over the radio? Sending out her signals for you?

Right, JP said, not knowing what he meant, already moving away. Except at the end of that trip as she got closer to home, it was not Nora's voice she heard but, as he had done on the bin, the knock, knock, knock of one object hitting another. A pause. And then again.

She held down the button.

Little Home?

Hi Mama!

She listens out, now, for the knocking. It comes when she is seven miles from home. It fills the cab of the lorry and she listens to it without answering for a couple of seconds. She tunes in, calls Nora back. Incoming, incoming, put the kettle on.

Part Ten

A DAY IN JANUARY

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Min

He has been crouched in the blind for so long that his legs have gone to sleep. He shifts to one side to try to release the pressure and closes his eyes against the tick of pins and needles from the blood returning. When he opens his eyes there is –

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Ori

She waits. There is nothing. That's not true: there is the river. She takes another step forward.

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Part Eleven

HANDS

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Leo

Three days and no sign of Ruth and Ori. A week and then two. He takes himself out into the gloomy evenings and hangs out with some of the children who have made a track from stolen wood and bricks where they can ride their bikes and their skateboards. He is nearly thirteen, they are almost all older than him. To begin with he just watches the others riding and then he finds himself a battered skateboard and starts to learn the names of the tricks. Heelflip, drop in, kick turn, tic tac; the rhythm of those words themselves something like riding fast: powerslide, ollie, frontside 180. He isn't that good at it. He falls and scrapes all the skin off. One time Nora comes along and he gives her his board so she can have a go. The sound of the wheels on the ground, lifting and bumping down, echoes inside the hollow space beneath the bridge. Nora is so much better than he is that he gives her the board and looks for something else to do at the ramps. Nora flips the board and rises high, turning in the air, coming down easy. Leo gets drunk for the first time and rises high, turning in the air, coming down hard and sick and awful. He does not like throwing up or the fog of the next day but he likes the feel of not quite touching the ground. He makes friends with the kids whose parents keep booze that is easy to steal or the ones who look old enough to buy it from the shop. Sometimes – though not always – the drink loosens the tight laces of the day and the week and the month and the years and lays them out flat, draws new routes over the top of them. There is Ori, as if she never left; here is Ruth lying beside him in the bed and waiting until he sleeps.

He cannot stay in the caravan with his mother. He hates his mother because Ori is gone and she seems unable to tell him why or where. He cannot understand how it could be so easy to simply misplace two people. He misses Ori with a burning pain that he does not know what to do with. He hates his mother because Ruth is gone and Ruth was another mother to

him. She was the mother who saw him at those times when every lightbulb inside him blazed with such enormous voltage that he was struck dumb and could not speak or move. At these moments Ruth would sit beside him patiently and wait until, one by one, enough of the lightbulbs went out to allow him to carry on. That was a big one, she would say as if she could see inside him to where the lightbulbs flashed and flickered. He misses Ruth desperately and in the small caravan he flails and screams and strikes his mother accidentally and then on purpose.

Where are they? he screams, cornering his mother, weeping. Where have they gone? She does not know, she says, she does not know, please, she does not know. Through the timeless buzz of vodka drunk warm he sees that she is afraid of him and oh please he cannot bear his mother backing away and the eerie noiselessness of the caravan and the crackle of Nora's radio in the dim light.

He figures out exactly how much he needs to work so he can drink what he wants to drink. He has a good brain for numbers but he gets fired for being late or stealing or speaking without knowing he is talking out loud. For a while he helps Susie with the whippets. Susie, slurping iced tea, tells him not to let a single one of them off the lead, they aren't to be trusted. He takes them seven at a time to the park and, after some consideration, lets them run. They skitter and jounce, emitting sharp noises of joy, racing the other dogs that seem, in comparison, to be going in slow motion. The skinny, ribby dogs slip between the past and the present, at times seeming convinced as a pack that a race has begun, as if they were back at the dog track where they were raised, noses lifted, legs churning. Their bodies are failing them, their knees crystallised with arthritis, their eyes clouding over, but one day when Leo is sat beneath a cedar tree, drifting, they believe as one that the greatest race of their lives has begun and they tear away, through the park and out of the gate, down towards the three-lane roundabout. By the time Leo gets down the hill there is a pile-up, ten or more cars and lorries, the dogs sat panting in the central island, legs spattered with blood. They were so happy, he tells Susie later, trying to explain to her what had happened. They were flying.

Later – when he has kept a great many of his own – he understands that his mother was keeping a secret. As a child all he knew was that she sometimes

struggled to meet his eyes, seemed unable to speak clearly, demurred and deferred.

As soon as he is old enough, he leaves. Except that he is a fish, hook through the lip, and he is swimming against the current and he cannot get away. Drunken dreams of the caravan lifted on a torrent of water and bearing down upon him. Drunken dreams of crouching in the dirt, trying to find the spare key so that he can get inside and sleep; oh wait, this isn't a dream, here he is, back again. He is out of money, trying to sober up, lying on the sofa and listening to Nora fiddling with the radio. Nora is searching for Ori and Ruth over the airwaves. His mother away again for work. On his knees in an alley stinking of urine, gin in the water bottle at work, burn marks from flipping burgers. He feels the slow breakdown of every part of him, like an organic machine gently switching off. In this decomposing state he is filled and overwhelmed with sound. The blasting burp of traffic surging and jamming and beeping lights and beeping reversing and the clack and click and stamp of shoes and doors slamming dogs yap yap yapping at cars cats yowling at dawn jangle of chains on the playground swings moving whump of heavy bags thrown onto the floor the derisive call of the birds and everywhere everywhere everywhere the yammer and hassle and blunt object of human chatter and sob and argument and persuasion and shout and phone call and stop that please and hold the ... He drinks to get quiet. Face down in the dirt outside the caravan, trying to find the spare key, the soft click of the door swinging open. Nora makes him instant noodles and they sit in the cabin the way they used to do when they were little, all three of them squashed in, pretending to drive to the sea. They are, how has this happened, grown-ups, and Ori is not here. Nora loves him. With her feet on the dashboard, she tells him she has been reading about the interlacing connections of trees and fungus beneath the ground, a warning and protection system, and how she has decided he is wired up to Ori. He wishes to cut the filaments; he wishes to forget.

He gets work with a company that delivers produce to schools and prisons. They teach him to drive and he likes, he finds, the feel of the vegetables and the fruit, the smell of them in the van, the heavy weight of the crates which make his arms stronger. He learns how to change the tyres on the old vans and how to hide the older vegetables at the bottom of the pile so they won't be noticed.

His mother, Nora keeps telling him, is trying to get in contact. Yes, he has been ignoring her. Each of her messages is fifty lightbulbs blaring at once. Finally, just to shut her up, he agrees to meet, cancels, agrees again, misses the arranged time because he forgets what day it is, and then, finally shows up. She is there when he arrives, sitting on a park bench, looking at the weedy green pond. She has homemade sandwiches for them both and a thermos of coffee which she offers to him. She talks about her job and about Nora's radio station. She asks him questions but he barely has the energy to answer them. They are always the same, about where he is working and where he is living and what he is going to do. He wonders if maybe he will just not see her again. He lets the thought turn over in his head until it is smooth with worrying, he feeds his sandwich to the ducks. She clears her throat beside him.

I need to talk to you, she says. A tone in her voice. He looks at her properly. She keeps her eyes pointed forward and holds her hands in her lap.

I think that Ruth and Ori might have gone to the island, she says.

What? You've seen them?

No. When they left. I think they might have gone to the island.

He has, without realising, stood up. It has been nearly twenty-five years. What island? he says, and then, even as she is falteringly explaining, he remembers the stories that Ruth used to tell. The sun – the water – the lighthouse. She is saying something else now.

I think that maybe they went and perhaps only wanted to visit, stay for a little while, but maybe something happened.

What? What happened?

I don't know. I am not really certain. Maybe they didn't go there.

You went, he says, realising the truth of it. He remembers, now, the morning she left, two or more months after Ori and Ruth were gone.

She doesn't answer, which is answer enough, and he loses all semblance of cool and shouts and asks why she didn't tell him then and what has she been doing and why has she told him now when it is far too late. And then he leaves.

He tries to go to the island but is told that it is not possible. A big storm at sea weakened the already disintegrating cliff and brought half of it down into the water. The rest is slowly crumbling and it is not safe. The island has

been reclaimed by the birds and the hares. He does not know what to do then. He has come too late. He sits on the beach and wanders around and gets drunk and makes plans and then forgets them. It is very cold. It is too cold to sit or lie on the beach which is what he wants to do. He wants to lie down and see if perhaps the sea will bring the island to him. He walks along the beach. The sky is bright and clear. There is a place, here, an estuary where the river meets the sea. It is a beautiful place, the call of seabirds, the marshy land either side of the wide swirling river as it breaks out. There were signs for a footpath which he begins to follow to escape the open wind. The footpath is a broad walkway of wooden slats over the top of the marsh, moving beside the river. He puts one foot carefully in front of the other, looking down at the path. By the time he stops, from tiredness, he is so far from the sea that he can no longer hear it. The broad walkway is gone and the path is mud, the river narrowed. He looks back, unsure of what to do, and then, because it is as good a decision as any, he continues walking forward.

Later, he takes off his shoes and carries them, although the blisters are already bad. At times it is difficult to follow the river. He climbs through back gardens and, once, darts across a railway track that bisects the towpath; he crosses busy roads and farmland with PRIVATE signs and barbed wire fences. Perhaps, he thinks as he walks, Ruth and Ori came this way. Anything is possible. Decades ago now, hand in hand. He puts his foot down and thinks: there, I have put my foot where yours went, there, and there and there.

Red sunset over a murky inlet and an abandoned old railway bridge. He eases off the towpath and into the trees, lies down underneath his coat. The noise of animals, no street lights here. He dreams that he is drunk, that he is floating, that he is weightless. He dreams that somehow, although this is impossible, he will come upon Ori. She has not aged, she is the child she was when she went missing, she is swimming along the river to the island.

Ori

The Italian editor meets her at the airport. There is a piece of paper with her name on it. In the car to the city, she signs copies of her book, her first, the title in Italian, the cover with the camper van and the shadow of the giant hare and the island on the sea. The editor is in gold sandals and has blue sunglasses on a silver chain around her neck. She tells Ori that the first time she read the book she thought it would end with the character finding her mother and she was so surprised that it did not. But it is the right ending, she says, the book would not have worked without it. At the hotel Ori washes her face and changes her sweaty clothes. She sends Min a message telling him that she has arrived.

There is an event in a small bookshop. She reads haltingly from the first few pages. She has read the words so many times recently that she almost knows them by heart. The room is quite full, chairs jammed close together and people standing at the back, filling the doorway. The interviewer is a famous Italian poet and she asks questions about mothers and daughters and about hares and about how Ori drew the pictures for the book. The translator sits very close to Ori and murmurs the words in English into her ear and then translates Ori's answers into Italian. There is a doubling and then a tripling of language, which makes her feel almost dizzy. Maybe it is the wine that she drank with the editor before the event, cold white wine in small tumblers at an outside table. Her answers are not good tonight, they are uncertain, tremulous. It has been tiring speaking about her mother who is not her mother, the mother of the book who is a giant hare that the Ori in the book sees once and then spends forever trying to find. It has been, this is the truth, almost awful talking about her lost mother and at times it has been hallucinatory and brilliant, as if, by speaking about her, Ori is bringing her back, calling her back. Yes. She has wondered so many times over the years if there is something she could do to bring her mother back. She wondered,

when the book finally came out, if maybe this was the way; her mother, or maybe someone else in the family she still can barely remember, would see it in a bookshop or being read by someone on the bus and one or both of them would come and find Ori, they would come to an event in a little bookshop in Rome and they would find her. She glances up at the room to try to steady herself. There is a woman in a blue belted shirt standing to one side of the chairs. Even when the interviewer or the translator are talking, she keeps her eyes on Ori. She has blonde hair, cut short around the ears, which have silver rings in them. She is too young to be Ori's mother but the way that she looks at Ori, intently, smiling a little, makes Ori think, confused, trying to listen to the translator's whispers, that maybe this woman knows her from before or has been sent here by someone who does.

After the event she sits at a little table at the back of the shop and signs more books. Her signature keeps changing, her hand wobbling. The editor keeps her company, calling out greetings in a ringing voice. Ori looks for the blonde woman in the signing queue but she is not there.

Ori finishes signing and goes out into the street. She has refused the editor's invitation to a dinner with other authors nearby. Her mouth hurts from speaking and at the same time she feels the exuberance of her words, of the way they are inked onto the page, of the enormity of calling for her mother through the book. The blonde woman from the event is standing on a nearby street corner, smoking a brown cigarette.

Hello, she says.

Hello, Ori says.

I was waiting for you. A friend of mine is having a party and if you aren't busy you should come.

Ori does not know what to say. The woman shrugs her shoulders. She is, Ori thinks, quite beautiful, the shape of her shoulders beneath the shirt, her bare feet in the thin strapped sandals. Ori feels a wave of embarrassment that she should probably remember where she knows this woman from but she does not.

It's a costume party but we can pick some flowers, on the way, to put in our hair, the woman says. She reaches out and takes Ori's wrist. Her fingers are surprisingly rough.

I think we aren't too late. She is looking at the watch on Ori's wrist.

OK, yes, Ori says.

There are piles of coats on the bed, the windows thrown open onto the warm night. There is wine, body temperature. She is sunburnt, dehydrated. The woman picked flowers from the edge of someone's garden on the way, wound them around her own neck and into Ori's fringe. At the first sip of wine Ori realises it has been hours since she last ate anything, the croissant that morning at the airport perhaps. The woman has vanished. The sitting room is full of people, talking, perched on the windowsills. Ori goes into the kitchen and opens cupboards, looking for food. There are bottles of beer in the sink, floating in melting ice. She holds one against her forehead. There is a packet of nearly empty cereal in the cupboard under the sink that she opens and digs into, eating it dry, swallowed from her hand. When she straightens the woman is at the counter. She has put on make-up, a smear of glitter around her eyelids. Some of the lights in the kitchen are broken, the little round bulbs coated with dust, and in the dimness, Ori feels the return of the panic that perhaps she knows this woman. She wishes that the woman would tell her who she is.

I can make you something, the woman says.

What? says Ori.

I can make you something. Is there anything in the fridge?

She goes in the fridge and pokes around. Someone comes into the kitchen to get a beer and asks Ori questions: is she enjoying her trip, does she like the city? By the time she looks back the woman is cutting cheese with a sharp silver knife. She puts mayonnaise onto bread and heats up a pan. Ori is drunker than she thought she was, the room does a weird tip and displaces her, she is somewhere else, she is in a hallway, there is a noise, insectile, a click click click.

I'm sorry, Ori says, but do I know you?

The sandwich has gone into the pan. It hits the browning butter with a sizzle. The woman looks up at her and smiles.

The woman laughs, holds up her hands. Yes. I'm sorry. I mean no. I should have said something but I didn't know what to say. We met when we were children.

I'm sorry, Ori says.

Don't be sorry. We only spent such a small time together and it was so long ago. My mum saw your name on your book and she remembered and rang me. She said that we played together once, you stayed at our house. And I did remember then, sort of.

Yes, Ori says, because she does. She feels a wave of disappointment that this is not someone from before she met Min, it is not someone who might know where the person who left her is. How are you? Ori says.

I'm good. She flips the toastie. Let's have another drink now that we both know who we are.

They hunt for something that isn't beer or warm wine, find a bottle wedged at the back of the nearly frozen-over freezer, crack it open. Reaching into the freezer her arm brushes Eva's wrist. The shock of recognition: the smell of popcorn, the little figures in the dollhouse.

Come on, Eva says. She puts the toasties onto a plate and takes the cold bottle in her other hand. They swing out of the kitchen and through the party. More people are arriving although it is late now. They go into the bedroom by the front door. There is just enough light to see the bed piled with coats and bags. Ori can feel the hairs all up and down her arms standing on end. Her mouth is burnt from biting into the toastie when the cheese was still hot, she can feel the place on her arm where it brushed Eva's. Eva knocks the glass against the bottle. *Come here*, it says. Ori has never heard it this way before. *Come here, find me, come here*. She is drunk. *Come here*, the tapping says, the glass clinking against the bottle. She closes her eyes and lurches forward and feels Eva, a breath away, slipping aside. She forgets to listen for the sound and opens her arms and rushes forward.

They make a date to meet the next day at the Sistine Chapel. When Ori wakes up she has a headache, her eyes glued together. She slugs water, considers not going, nearly misses the bus. The tour she is booked onto wends its way so slowly around the wider Vatican Museum, pausing, it seems, at nearly every painting or sculpture. The tour guide is speaking in English but she cannot quite hold on to his words. It is very busy, streams of tourists pressing through the security gates, buffeting her. She thinks maybe she will peel off, try to find another way out. She is too hot, it is too busy, the fact of Eva's sudden reappearance is too startling on such a warm day, with such a hangover. She lifts her arms to try to get away but the tour guide has sighted her motion and is herding them aggressively forward, shaking his head, waving both wrists as if directing aircraft. They are approaching a bottleneck ahead. She can smell sweat, perfume. There are signs for quiet and it passes through them so that by the time they come into

the chapel they mostly have fallen silent. She forgets to look for Eva. The ceiling above her is overwhelming, paintings everywhere she looks. She tries to move around logically, beginning in one corner, but she keeps getting distracted by something new. She does not like it, she decides, it is too much, her head is beating dully, the tourists around are muttering and being shushed and quietening and then muttering again. She wants to lie on the cold floor but there is no space. She wants to get out but she cannot find the door. Is there a door? She circles and circles. It is difficult to breathe. A large family with three children moves away and leaves a gap in the centre of the floor. She takes it and stands with her legs braced, tips back her chin. Directly above her there is a panel with some space. She examines it. There are two painted figures either side of the space, two men, one naked, the other covered. They are reaching out towards one another. The hands of the two men stretch out and the fingers so nearly touch. Between the reaching fingers there is barely a breath of space. They are trying and trying to touch but they never will, they are reaching and reaching out towards one another. Someone is touching her back. She sees, like the after-image of a fire, the hands stretching out. Someone is grappling at her, trying to move her. She wants to fight them but doesn't have the energy. They are moving out of the room now. All of the lights have gone off, she thinks, and it takes her a moment to realise that her eyes are closed. When she opens them, they are outside and Eva is holding Ori's face in her hands. They are very close to one another. Eva's hands are quite tight, enclosing her, she is frowning, her breath smells like eggs, cheese, onions.

Oh, Ori says, oh.

Where are you? Eva says. Shall we go eat some pasta? Ori? Can you hear me?

Her face is very close. There are freckles and sun-blemishes on her skin and Ori feels the desperation of those two reaching hands, so far from one another, endlessly separated.

Ori

It is four in the morning at the hospital. A midwife pulls back the blue curtain and comes in. Eva was not allowed to stay, Ori is alone, crying, holding the baby, trying to feed him. He is crying too. I am tired, Ori tries to tell her, I am afraid I will fall asleep holding him, help me. She wants to say. I am. Please. I need to go home. I need to. Ori tries to speak to her but she cannot.

Could I have – she says. Could I please have a –?

The midwife stands looking at her. She is Ori's mother, come back to help her. Some tremor runs through the hospital, through her, up the walls. The smell of sun hardening the dirt, the smell of blood from the hare pelts hung up to dry, the smell of salt carried on the wind, the smell of fire and smoke. Ori's mother, holding the blue curtain and looking past it at her, her bare tanned arms streaked with muck, her ankles below the rolled-up trousers scratched and torn from brambles, her mouth opening, just about to speak. It is a dream. Isn't it? Isn't it just a dream?

Finally, in the morning, they say that she can go. Eva has cleaned the cottage, left flowers on the counter and beside the bed. There is a glittery banner hung from one curtain rail in the sitting room to another: WELCOME HOME.

I still can't believe that you took that, Eva says.

Ori looks at her feet where she has put the metal sick bowl from the hospital.

I know. I don't know why, she says.

Ori sits on the sofa and drinks a cup of tea and every part of the house is different now. Just as every part of her is different. Every part has been destroyed and built again around the tiny, tiny baby. They order pizza and

eat it while Eva holds the baby. The tiredness is like a great ship passing along the road outside, covering the windows.

It's so good to have someone else holding him, she says.

Can you believe his hands, Eva says.

Yes, Ori says. I know.

It is so good to have someone else holding him. At the same time, without him on her something is missing. She has forgotten something. She has left some enormous and vital part of herself at the hospital and she cannot figure out what it is.

Let me hold him again, she says.

They are not yet very good at the transfer. Eva tries to get her arm out from under his head while holding his head in her hand and Ori tries to take the weight of his little body and they worry out loud about his floppy neck, which needs constant support, how useless he is. She holds him. She tries to feed the baby and she tries to take every single part of him into her eyes, to somehow ingest him so that there is not a bit of him she does not know. She holds him, and his weight, at times, is so exactly the weight of the thing that was inside her belly that she is astounded and she looks at him and thinks: oh, there you are, all along, I can't believe it, there you are. At other times she holds him atop her still-enormous belly and she thinks that some mistake must have been made. The baby is still inside her. She is waiting for him to come. She is holding this other, wrinkled baby as a favour to some exhausted person. She will do whatever she can to help them but when her baby comes she will give this one back. Eva gets up and puts on a record and Ori sits in a daze.

Shall I hold him? Eva says.

Yes, Ori says. She had forgotten he was in her arms. They do the wobbly, badly done transfer again and Eva holds him in the middle of the little room and dances a bit, bobbing back and forth gently. Ori tries to move her torso so that she can dance with them but the scar is very raw and it hurts.

Use your arms, Eva says. Use the bowl.

Ori puts her arms in the air and waves them around like long grass, then she picks up the bowl and waves it – maybe that is what it is for. Eva jigs and dances and sings the wrong words in the wrong places and the baby makes a long sighing noise which makes them look at one another and then laugh.

Down the long hallway to the room at the end where the baby does not sleep, where she screams at him and throws her phone at the wall to stop herself from throwing him. Headphones on throughout the day, listening to the audio file of Min's dreaming hares, the beep and whirr of their sleeping map. Putting the baby into the pram and walking and walking up and down the road, singing Old MacDonald and Twinkle Twinkle little fishes in the water in the sea and the spider came down and the damp smell of urine and milk and the smell of the river.

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Part Twelve

THE ISLAND AGAIN

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Edith

She first saw Patrick in the front row of the church where she had been going since she was a child. His mother, who used a stick, was struggling to stand and he bent and helped her and then walked with her towards the door of the church. Among Edith's friends there was discussion of this stranger, his tidy haircut, the way he bent his head to listen as his mother spoke. They saw him in the shop, carrying the basket, lifting oranges from the pile, putting out change onto the counter. It was said that he was following in his father's footsteps and would one day lead the congregation of a church. Edith's friends spoke about him as if he were already their husband; it was so easy for them to imagine him opening a front door and calling out that he was home. In the way they spoke it was possible to see the colour of that door and hear the very particular sound that Patrick's feet would make on the floor, loud at first and then quieter as he took off his shoes and walked only in his socks. When Edith's friends grew bold and spoke in whispered invocations of the bedroom where Patrick would take off more than his shoes, she tried to imagine it but could see nothing.

One day Patrick came to Edith's house and drank tea in the sitting room with her parents. Afterwards Edith and Patrick walked around the garden and she was surprised to find that he knew the names of many of the flowers. When he bent to examine something the back of his neck was exposed, very pale, and she tried, daring herself, to conceive once more how this moment could step away from itself and become that bedroom and he, husband, in the bathroom, the sliver of light beneath the door, the sound of the water running and he just about to come out. When he straightened, she felt ambushed, certain that she must be wearing her thoughts on her face, flushed and ashamed, but he was looking at her calmly, and she felt the very first sense of that guttering which ran between them and which was

flooded with cool, crystal water; they were thinking the same things, they were both – she thought – trying to imagine a way forward.

The honeymoon hotel room had a double bed beneath a floral eiderdown and lace-covered windows that looked out to the sea. The first night they lay side by side and the air all around them vibrated, as if filled with thousands and thousands of insects. She could smell the toothpaste on his breath, the soap on his hands, she could hear the minute sounds of his digestion and breath. She waited for something to happen. It would happen between them and it would change everything. She was uncertain what shape it would take or how she might prepare herself. She felt the tiny movements of his hands, loosening the edge of the duvet where it was tucked in tight, and then she heard his breath deepen. She lay for a long time waiting. She wondered if perhaps she needed to sleep for it to occur, like a dream that she would only understand when she woke, and she closed her eyes and tried to fit her breathing to his.

They drank tea in the hotel lounge and spoke to one another as if they were strangers in a train carriage with a long journey ahead of them. Above them, between them, Edith felt the space of the bedroom with its ominous and unknowing meaning; their suitcases in the wardrobe, the wide-rimmed bath on its metallic lion claws where she had found strands of his hair. She thought maybe she should suggest they leave their tea, still hot, and return to the room and begin. She tried to send this thought along the guttering to him, her thighs aching, the tea spilling onto her saucer, but when he looked up it was only to suggest that they go down to the beach. They put on their coats. The beach was covered in hills of shingle that gave way beneath their feet and sent them slipping and sliding to the bottom. They held on to one another and laughed, as if they were good friends. She waited to feel startled or overjoyed by this contact but instead she was reminded of the way he had helped his mother in church, solicitous, so she would not fall. The sea was grey and when they took off their shoes and submerged their feet it was startlingly cold. Sometimes he drew closer, almost by accident, and sometimes he was further away. She wanted to say out loud what she was thinking. She was thinking about the bedroom; she was thinking about the parts of him she could not see and how if they did not do it now it

would be too late. She felt the words at the edge of her, nearly given over to him; but she could not. She could not.

They ate dinner. Upon his white shirt collar she saw there was a brown fingerprint, from the gravy. She had supposed that marriage would immediately draw them close but she felt as if they were moving backwards, they were becoming more and more strange to one another.

She put on her nightdress and lay on the bed. He moved in the bathroom, his shadow infiltrating the line of light beneath the door, the sound of the tap turned off and then on again. She lay on top of the duvet cover so that he would see her when he came out and know that whatever was meant to happen would happen now, they would go forward. She had a trembling sense that she would touch him and he would touch her and that it would dissipate this loneliness which she had always had, since she was a child, digging in the dirt of the garden with her bare hands. He did not come out of the bathroom. Someone in one of the other rooms of the hotel made a sudden noise, perhaps a laugh. She was cold, on top of the duvet, the tap had been running for a long time. She got under the covers and turned onto her side and waited but he did not come out of the bathroom and, at some point, she fell asleep.

In the morning Patrick asked the hotel if they could have their breakfast wrapped up and be given a thermos of coffee. They went out early to the beach and walked up and down, passing the thermos between them. They did not say much to one another. His mouth, she thought dimly, as she drank from the place where he had drunk from, but beyond that she felt despair and began to think that they would return to the church where they had got married. Everyone would be there, waiting, still, wearing their wedding outfits, turning to look at them, having been expecting them. It did not work, Patrick would tell them, we cannot be married after all. She slipped down and sat, looking out at the water. The sky had been cloudy on the previous days but now it was clear and she could see that there was something out there, on the sea. It was not a boat. It was big and seemed to rise high out of the water.

What is that? she said, pointing.

Oh, it's an island, he said, I saw it in the guidebook.

A boat was found that could take them across. The sea was choppy and the stinging wind woke her up but when she turned to look at Patrick she saw he had gone green.

Are you alright? she said.

He shook his head, seemed unable to speak. Without thinking she put her hand on the back of his neck and pushed his head between his knees, hoping to quell his nausea. He folded beneath her palm. The island got closer. It was a forbidding and craggy place, not pretty like the seaside town. The man gave them some guidance on getting to the top of the cliff and said he would return in three hours.

On the beach Patrick sat on a rock with his eyes closed. She looked in the deep rockpools searching for crabs, and then stepped inside one of the caves set into the cliff. It was damp and she felt the cold of underground air blown up towards her. She considered walking further in, away from the grey beach light, away from Patrick on the rock with his head still bent and his hands hanging between his knees. When his nausea faded and he managed to get up and look for her she would be gone. He would not be able to find her, the island would swallow her, the rock would close around her. She could almost feel it, as she stood in the shadow, and the skin on her arms went bumpy. She stepped backwards. Patrick was there and she collided with him.

I'm sorry, she said.

No, I am sorry, he said.

Do you feel better?

Yes, he said, although he still looked pale. Shall we go up and walk a little?

They scrambled to the top. The wind howled over the eaves of the cliff and blew them together so that they held hands to help one another forward. The island was long and thin and the mainland looked further away than it was. There was a round circle of trees ahead that they walked towards. As they got closer she could see something between the trunks of the trees. They slid down the slope: it was a lighthouse.

Should we see if anyone is there? she said.

It's automated, I read about it. There's no one here now.

She became aware that they were the only people on the whole island. When Patrick had visited her parents' house and they walked in the garden together she had felt, rather than seen, her parents at the window, watching

them. Even in the hotel bed with its corseted covers, there was a sense of rooms on either side of them, of the thin walls. They were so frightened, the two of them, flung together. She stepped a couple of paces from him and tried to let the air enter and exit her, tried to remember how this action worked. They were alone for the first time, properly, and in the trees were little birds and the man who brought them over on the boat had told them that it was possible to see seals sometimes. She could smell Patrick's scent which already was familiar from the clothes she had taken from the suitcase and hung in the wardrobe. He looked at her and then reached out and pressed quite hard between her eyebrows with the pad of his thumb. His mouth was soft and the top lip was a little curved. For the first time she saw ahead of them what would happen. What an amazing power to observe the future as if it were already laid down, to feel it settling into place. She looked up at the underside of the canopy above his head and she gave into this, whatever this was, this agreement, this beginning. She imagined how it would be before it was, understood the tick of longing beginning to tunnel up and down, saw quite clearly the span of years between them, the certainty of his voice as he came in through the green front door and called out that he was home, padding forward in his socked feet. She knew the fact of a child, could almost see her, running, running.

Ruth

She turns and starts walking back to Ori. The ground is treacherous. The island spins around her, fills her; she keeps walking. As she walks she gives away some of the island – it belongs only to her, beloved, the clear and ringing dream of it that she has had since she was a child in that house by the river – and she thinks: I am walking to Ori. I am walking back to Ori. They will return to the caravan now, to JP and Nora and Leo. She walks fast. She will take her daughter back to real life now and save them both from the tangles of this swooping dream. She walks, thinking of the words she will say to Ori. I love you, I will always love you. The ground ahead is –

Her foot goes forward and then down very quickly. Her heart makes a jerking rush in her chest. There is no rock where there should be rock. She goes forward into the rock which is actually an absence of rock and down. The water in the cave catches her and takes her very fast into the wind of tunnels and she is gone before she realises what has happened. Beneath the island there is a labyrinth and she is pulled through, back and forth, tangled up, caught in secret currents that batter beneath the rock. Thoughts of finding Ori. The silken, vibrating floor of the trampoline which bends beneath her feet and propels her forward. Marvin with the crooked arrows of his hands pointing her on: this way, this way, this way. She lets go, she gives in. She is limestone, hollowed out, she is salt water and fossil and bone, she is tide and fish and nothing

Part Thirteen

A DAY IN JANUARY

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Ori

Min is away again, at the university or out doing fieldwork. She is alone in the house. She holds the baby and he sleeps. I do not love you, she thinks when he opens his small, blinking eyes. She watches television. It gets very late without her knowing how the time has passed so fast. She changes the baby out of the sleeping bag, which is grotty with hardened sick. He wakes, groggily, but is placated with milk. She makes a decision and dresses herself in clothes off the washing horse, struggling into her father's green jumper. She kisses the baby's face and his puckered, suspicious mouth and puts a jumper on him too, warm socks. He is starting to doze again, even as she manipulates his arms and legs, his head tipping forward. She puts him into the sling and zips her coat up around him against the cold. The metal bowl is on the windowsill of the sitting room. When she picks it up there is a grubby shifting noise from inside. She had put her island stones in there for safekeeping and forgotten. She lifts them out now and puts them into the pocket of her coat. She wants to take the metal bowl with her as well. She picks it up and puts it beneath her arm.

Through the front door. The night is cold. The baby is heavy against her chest. She walks down the back field and towards the river at the bottom of the garden. When she puts her hand in her pocket to feel, once more, the stones, she makes contact with her phone. She lifts it out without looking at the screen, lets it fall. She can hear the sound of the water now.

The river is shallow in this place but deeper further along. She follows it. A few times she has seen people swimming here, their bare frozen arms and legs, swimming hats covering their heads. She has thought them brave (though Eva, joking, said they were foolish) because the water is so cold

and the current is often strong but now – now she understands them for what they are.

To give in.

To let go.

She thinks that if the baby is awake she will not do it, but when she looks down at the top of his tufted head he is sleeping. He sleeps with such trusting abandon against her, he is warm, like an animal. It is so cold. It is cloudless. It is quiet. Should she take off her shoes? She will keep on her shoes. When she puts her hands into her pockets the stones are there and she thinks: oh, this must have been what you were for, all along. She bends carefully and roots for more in the undergrowth beside the riverbank. She drops the new stones into her pockets and then, reconsidering, takes some out and puts them into the metal bowl. She thinks about the stones and how, when the current takes her (takes them, takes them, takes them) the stones will knock together: *I am here, I am here; I am not here, I am not here*. If she is going to do it, she needs to do it now. She walks in and the water sloshes over her shoes and though she is ready for it to be cold she is not ready for the feeling of relief which is careful inside her and which expands and though it is cold it is not as cold as the sea on the island which she has begun to remember more and more of. She goes in up to her knees and then she stops. She waits for help. She waits for the midwife to push back the blue curtain and come towards her. She waits for the health visitor to come splashing in and lift the baby from the sling. She waits for her mother. Where have you been? her mother will say. Where have you been? When they broke her waters with the long-curved hook she felt like she was the island and the tides were moving inside her. Enough now. She wonders what time it is. She walks in another step and the water cuts a very cold sawed line across her thighs.

Leo

He sleeps late and has to rush. Mess in the bedroom at the house where he lodges; his shoes, somewhere, his keys, somewhere, a clean t-shirt, probably not. Bad taste at the back of his mouth but someone else in the bathroom when he goes to brush his teeth. Shoes. Here. Bright day. Keys. The van going click click and then starting. Calls from deliveries he should have done already, calls from Nora, who has been leaving messages all week, calls from – nearly missing a red on the traffic lights and catching the brake just in time. A day already somehow the length of three.

He picks up crates at the market and loads them into the back of the van. He sings a little song to keep himself going. *Can we talk?* Nora has messaged. She wants to know how long he is going to stay in the town on the river, she wants to see him, she wants him to see JP. He sends her three kisses and doesn't say anything else. Two months ago he walked along the river until he was so tired he couldn't walk any further. Up the slant of the towpath and to the road, hobbling into the town, sleeping on a bench until it got light. It was a place as good as any. When he woke up on the bench there was a delivery driver unloading crates of oranges outside a juice shop who said that, yes, they were looking for drivers, directed him where to go. It was like going back to the last time he had done this sort of work: Ori had only been gone five or so years, he was still talking to his mother, Nora had found an old radio in a charity shop and got it working again. He sometimes surprised himself by seeing his own hands, on the steering wheel, reaching out to open a door, and realising that he – like the silly whippets who again and again forgot they were not racing – had got muddled up.

He gets coffee at the place where the drivers go. It is, maybe, three o'clock. He should eat but he is not hungry. There is some dispute: a crate has been mislaid and no one can find it. One of the drivers is a man who often loses things and is being blamed. The driver who is being blamed

leans against the side of the van with his arms crossed, smiling. Leo asks one of the drivers who is standing near him where the crate was supposed to go and she tells him the name of a restaurant where he has not done deliveries before. OK, he says. The other drivers suggest places where the man might have left it. He might have left it at his house, he might have left it at the pub, he might have left it at his girlfriend's house and does his wife know where the missing crate is?

He finishes the rest of his deliveries. It does not seem possible, as is sometimes the case, for him to go back to his bedroom at the shared house. It is a cold day but the room is awful at times like this, the flat is so loud. He drives, picks up some beers, rides the ring road around the town. There is ice in the air through the open windows. He understands himself to be drunker than he first thought. He pulls over. He goes round and opens the back of the van, wanting to lie down on the floor and finish drinking the beer. He stumbles as he is climbing in, kicking a stack of empty boxes, catching himself with a hand on the back wall. There is a crate here, hidden, and when he examines the label, he finds that it is the missing delivery, mistakenly put in his van that morning. He does not know the time. The river is cold and fast. The island is slipping into the sea. He decides to take the crate and leave it at the restaurant, which is an hour or so away, not normally on his route. It is good to do this, to do something, to do anything. He drives. It takes him a little while to find the restaurant which is tucked away in a corner of the square. He parks on the kerb and heaves the crate out and onto the pavement. There is still a light on in the window, he should carry it inside, but he does not want to speak to anyone else today. He will leave it here. It does not matter. He bends to nudge the crate closer to the door and then hears something on the other side. He is a child again, warm shoulders in the sun, smell of chlorine. He is mistaken, it is not within him at all, it is out in the world. It is coming from the restaurant. He goes forward and tries the door, which opens.

Eva

At the apex of the evening the new waiter drops a bottle of red wine. Eva is in the kitchen, leaning forward to wipe the edge of a plate, shifting her weight off her aching feet, thinking at the same time: two whipped goat cheese, message Min, check delivery for tomorrow. The crash of the smashing bottle is preceded by a shout of horror, almost a word, not quite, and then the volcanically loud noise of the glass breaking. She pushes the door of the kitchen open. The wine has gone in a long arc, up the edge of some of the white tablecloths, soaking the shoes of the waiter whose hands are in the air still, fist clenched around an absent bottle. The restaurant is full and silent, turned to look. In the quiet the noise of the metronomes on the tables is very loud. The waiter gets on his knees to clean up. The kitchen is busy, almost out of control. The delivery company which brings them their produce lost one of their crates and at the last minute the menu had to be changed. She rang the company and yelled down the phone; they will not use them again. She returns to her station and chops and cooks and barely feels the scalding oil that flicks onto her bare arms. There is the smell of the pine they are smoking the fish with and the tang of the blackened leeks on the open fire. She thinks of Ori. She thinks of Ori's open, angry, anguished mouth, and her own bafflement, I don't know, I want to help, don't do that.

It is bad, staying at the cottage alone. The fridge is empty, the sink is filled with moulding coffee cups. A few days before Christmas Min rang her, was she coming? There was accusation in his voice that she couldn't bring herself to argue against. He was right, he was right to be angry. Was she going to come at Christmas? She told him that she could not unless Ori rang herself and asked. Ori, she said, does not want me there. It was very bad in those few days when the restaurant was closed. Her baby was somewhere

else and she was here, in the cold house, eating pizza for the second meal in a row, crying at adverts on the TV. The cottage has a narrow stairway with a long white wall stretching up and it is here she pinned all of her ideas about the new menu. Scraps of paper, written on: recipe fragments, the idea for the metronomes, memories of Ori in Rome eating ice cream, memories of Ori in that hallway, the smell of popcorn.

The idea came to her when Ori was in the first trimester and struggling to eat anything but soft vegetable dumplings. Eva learned to make the dough and brought Ori dumpling soup in bed, dumplings and chilli oil, dumplings and noodles. Eva was trying, a bit frenzied, to figure out the new menu before the baby arrived and she wanted to try the recipes out on Ori, except anytime Ori ate anything that wasn't a dumpling she threw up. She thought how much she loved Ori, how she would make her whatever she wanted to eat, she would do this forever. A menu for Ori, no, a menu of Ori.

At the end of service she tidies tables, soaps down the metal counters, checks off a list of things they need to buy for tomorrow, gets started on the ice cream. When everyone is gone she pours a glass of wine. She does not know how to go back to Min's house now. The time Ori screamed at the baby, as if she would strike him, and Eva stood outside in the corridor, weeping, not knowing what to do. Should she go in? If she went in, Ori would shout at her too. All she wanted was to do the right thing. She could not go in and she could not go back downstairs. She put her ear to the door and listened.

She finishes the ice cream and starts preparing the crab. It gets late. She will not go home tonight. She will sleep on the sofa in the office. In the gloom the metronomes are still ticking. She turns them on in the morning when she gets there and makes coffee; and she thinks about Ori as a child, her teeth gritted, darting towards Eva. Later, older, Ori in the bedroom of that party, the boom of the bass in Eva's collarbone, the sound as she called Ori to her. One of the metronomes is not right. She hears it now and puts down the carving knife, wipes her hands on her apron, goes through the door to the other room. There is one metronome on each table, they have little red boxes and ticking gold hands. One is not in sync with the others, but she cannot, standing there, tell which. She finds that she has raised her hands over her ears and closed her eyes. There is cold air on her face and

when she turns there is a man standing in the door to the street, looking around. The metronomes are beating in rhythm again.

Hello? she says.

I brought you – he begins to say, and then stops.

He is very thin, his chest bowed, his ribs like ladders. She waits for him to tell her why he is there and then sees the branded t-shirt he is wearing.

You've brought the food? It's too late.

He is looking at something on one of the tables. When she follows his eyes she sees that it is the menus, spattered with food, which she has stacked up to throw away. He picks one up and holds it and then looks at her.

Ori? he says.

What? Eva says.

Are you Ori?

What? No.

He holds the menu up to her. It is entitled *ORI'S MENU*. He runs his finger down the list and stops at the crab dish which she had so agonised over, it is named *THE ISLAND*.

Ori, he says again.

Jupjaapun

Three or four times, in frustration, *I already told you this, Mum*, Nora has tried to explain radio waves to her. It goes something like this. Radio waves are created by alternating current flowing through a metal wire. As the current oscillates it creates an electric charge and a magnetic field and these two things interact with one another to make an electromagnetic wave. These electromagnetic waves move through space at the speed of light and they carry encoded information in their frequency. It is possible for the radio waves to be disturbed or blocked by electronic interference, lightning, solar flares, atmospheric disruption; the waves may struggle to penetrate certain objects or they may bounce off surfaces so that the signal takes different paths and arrives at different times. Sometimes temperature changes in the atmosphere can bend or reflect the signal so that it is lost. What is lost is not just vibrations but information, communication; a reaching out from one place to another. JP is never quite sure, during these conversations, amidst Nora's frustration, exactly why she so wants her to understand the workings of the radio wave. Yes, she says, yes, I think I understand now. And Nora, across the café table or beside her on the park bench or on the steps of the old caravan, will only huff, not believing her. It isn't magic, she says, it's science. Yes, JP says, yes, I get it, science, cool. She knows – as she often does with both of her children, now they are adults but also before that, years and years of it – that she does not get it. The oscillating, interacting wave or whatever is blocked and can't get through; or else only gets through in jumbled bits and pieces, there is a storm or an impenetrable wall that is stopping it and it is probably her fault.

Someone came in the night and smashed open the chicken cage. They scaled the metal pedestrian gate and then broke the lock with a hammer or brick. The chickens are stressed, free-roaming all over the farm, pecking out

one another's feathers. There are smashed eggs, also, spattered against the side of the old people's home which abuts the community farm. She fills a bucket and goes round to wash off the smeared yolk with a cloth. Two of the teenage boys, who volunteer weekends at the farm, are trying to chase down the chickens and doing a bad job. She feeds the goats and the sheep that have been lowing since she arrived, tips the gathered water off the tarp covering the sandpit they use for the toddler sessions and, to keep her angry hands busy, digs out weeds that are growing among the spinach. The farm flooded the week before when they had all the big rains, and the field is still soggy.

She makes a coffee in the lean-to kitchen while the older boy carries two chickens tucked beneath his arms, cooing to them, back to the cage. She gets out her phone and tries Leo again. She's been ringing him for weeks now, and sometimes he answers and then hangs up immediately but mostly he just lets it ring. It was a mistake to tell him about the island. He'd come in October, shouted nonsensically, cried and lashed out when she tried to get near him. In the night she found him asleep on the pavement outside her flat, almost peaceful, his hands steepled to hold up his chin. She took him inside and put him in the bath in his boxers, and he cried like a child while she washed the blood from around his nose, cut his fingernails and toenails, shampooed his soft downy hair. She lay beside him in bed while he slept, didn't dare fall asleep herself, except she did, and then he was gone again. In three years, he will be forty. How has that happened? She doesn't know. Often Nora rings her and rants down the phone. She needs to do something about him, what is she going to do? She doesn't know. *Come and stay with me*, she messaged him, *help on the farm, sleep, dry out*. He has never replied to these messages. Sometimes, listening to Nora berating her, she has a swaying sense of getting unclipped from her safety harness and she remembers when Ruth and Ori first vanished. Nora got quiet and staring but Leo, who was twelve, just kept shouting at her to fix it. She needed to do something, what was she going to do? She didn't know. She lost it at him, shook him until his teeth rattled, she was trying, she was trying. When she came out of herself Nora was hiding underneath the kitchen table, the caravan stank of her sweat and the burning scrambled eggs on the stove. Leo slammed the door and didn't come back until the next afternoon. She held his face in her hands and together they printed out MISSING posters and stuck them up everywhere. They went to the police station and sat for a

long time in the waiting room. She could see that Leo was starting to panic, he wasn't blinking and whenever anyone made a noise he stared for a long time in that direction before turning back. At the counter JP made a report but it was clear the woman taking notes didn't think much of it. They weren't her family, not really, they were just friends; friends could come and go.

She is late for work. She counts the chickens, gives the teenagers jobs to do, then takes the bus up to the lorry depot. Her mind is elsewhere, she nearly misses her stop. Leo still won't answer his phone. She remembers, bodily, intrinsically, the first time she realised she didn't know where Ruth and Ori were. If only she could know that they were happy; if only she could know they were dead. She said that to Leo last time she saw him, slumped in the bath: whatever you do, don't go missing on me. She leaves him a voicemail: JUST ANSWER THE PHONE.

Traffic is horrendous. She has become good, after so many years, of letting the hours slide under the wheels. She stops at a services for the requisite break, eats a sandwich, goes to the bathroom. Gets on the road. Rainy sunset. She stops again for a sleep and goes dreamless for seven hours, wakes at three to fog banks moving like clouds across the road. Jimmies the window down to let in the air and wake her up. Fires up the ignition.

When she looks at the clock on the dashboard it is nearly four o'clock in the morning and time for Nora's show to start. It is January. She turns on the radio, clicks through the channels, eyes on the road. It is a long straight road.

Five years ago the show was online but then a channel picked it up and it got underground popular, late-night listeners. There is a music show on first and then Nora's voice, dim, through the speakers. She turns it up. She listens to the show in a distracted way, thinking about Leo, taking in only every other word, her brain going back and forth and up and down. People ring in and tell Nora about their missing partners and children and friends, Nora asks them questions. Towards the end of the show, as ever, Nora tells the story of Ruth and Ori. The island – lost – nearly twenty-five years ago. At a train crossing there are lights on either side of the road, they flash intermittently, red and orange, red and orange. She brakes. The barrier comes down. She feels the train through the vibration of the chassis before she sees it. It barrels past, blasting lights, a freight train with ten or more

carriages. The barrier comes up. She starts rolling, bump, bump across the metal tracks and down onto the flat road the other side. There are no street lights out here, no other cars for miles and miles.

Home 20 everyone, Nora says at the end of the show, until next time. And this, as always, goes out to Ori. Are you out there, Ori?

Through the little speakers then there is the sound of one object knocking against another. JP knows, listening, that it is the flat edge of Nora's phone against the side of her table. Normally she finds the knocking, after a moment, unbearable and turns it off. Today, though, her fingers on the volume control go, somehow, the wrong way and rather than turning it down, it gets louder, the sound of knocking going forcibly, almost painfully, out into the truck. Her eyes leave the long road for less than half a second and when she looks back up there is something straddling the centre line. She hits the brakes before she knows what it is. A forty-four-tonne lorry going at sixty through the pitch black of a lightless, foggy road takes a long time to stop. The front of the lorry rushes through and she opens her mouth to scream though nothing comes out. Whatever is in the road strikes the metal prow and flies apart. She comes to a stop. Gets out into the night which smells of salt and wet. She knows what she saw there, in the road, head lifted up to look at her, thirty years out of time, in the yellow waterproof she stole from JP. She walks back down the length of the lorry and examines the road, looking and looking for something, a body, perhaps flung into the ditch, but there is nothing.

When she gets back into the cab there is a shake in her hands and arms that she can't stop. On her phone there are three missed calls from a number that she does not recognise. She starts the ignition, wanting to get home. The phone rings again. Mum, Leo says, Mum.

Edith

The kitchen cupboards are empty, the bookshelves in the sitting room clear, the room where she and Patrick slept for so many years has only the bed remaining. The boxes are stacked in the hallway and in the back of the car. She has told them she will be gone by that afternoon; the new family will arrive. All that is left to do then is – yes. She goes up the stairs and stands in the doorway of the room which no longer belongs to Ruth, no longer even belongs to Edith. She opens the binbag, starts putting things in. She makes no division between charity shop and bin, in it goes. Touching a jumper or a pencil case brings on a jolt which she pushes past with enormous force. She is like water; she cannot be stopped. When she went missing there was – and in those months after – she took Dylan by the throat and she shook him trying to make the truth of where Ruth was fall out of him – and some days she waited and waited for Patrick to say her name – and some days she saw him waiting and waiting for her to say Ruth's name – and in the end –

When Ruth got pregnant, Edith hammered nails into the windowsill, locked the door and would not let Ruth out. She could hear the girl crashing around inside the room, shouting and swearing. She knew that Ruth was safe and, to her surprise, sleep came easily for the first time in years. She slept as if making up for lost time, so deeply. She took Ruth tea and meals and, once the girl stopped throwing things, sat with her in the room. Now, years later – Ruth so long gone that Edith cannot bring her voice to mind – she throws the last of Ruth's things into the binbag and ties it closed. She remembers the enormous noise waking her, the buzz of static in her ears as she grappled with the lock. By the time she got through the door, the night was blasted through the smashed window, and Ruth was gone.

She goes downstairs to take the binbag out and, instead, locks the door of the house. She lies on the bare mattress in Ruth's room. Late afternoon someone tries to get into the house. They use their key and then, when the chain stops them, call in through the gap. Hello? Hello? Is anyone there? This is my house, she thinks, this is my house.

Ruth is everywhere; she is everything. She is growing pains, two inches between the bottom of her trousers and her shoes, taking up more and more space. She is jumping down the last four stairs and she is swimming in the bath, on her belly, sloshing.

Edith falls asleep and when she wakes it is late. The silence is intolerable, the house is empty and terrible. Ruth is nowhere and nothing. She gets up and goes outside to the pavement. The street is quiet. It could be any time, it could be any year. If she goes back inside Patrick will be there, unlacing his shoes. If she goes back inside Ruth will be sat at the kitchen table.

She goes down the street and up to the bridge and then, not thinking, takes the path to the river. There are plans for new builds in the meadow and the grass has been stripped to mud by the diggers, the footpath churned up. The brown water is high and fast, the fields are newly flooded and sodden. The call of an owl, creasing through the black. There is the sound of the river moving in little anxieties against its banks and there is the sound of her breathing, heightened from the walk. This is the place where Ruth said she saw the woman, walking into the water, with the baby. The hot summer when the roads melted and there were so many flying ants that Edith found them in her bed, swept them off the back step. The smell of Ruth's skin, sun cream and salt. In the years after Ruth left Edith would, still, sometimes come down here and find herself looking. Looking for what? For some sign, long missed, to explain what had happened. Edith – feeling reckless and buzzed – takes off her shoes and her socks. She can see only suggestions of what is around her and must feel her way forward with her feet and her hands. In the gloom nothing is real, she cannot touch anything, she moves above the ground and there is no sound. Except then her hands brush the tall nettles, bright pain, and she stumbles forward and is instantly submerged up to the knees. Cold, cold. She tries to catch her balance and for a moment it seems she does not have it, she will fall, she will go under, the current will take her. There is no one to think of her, there is no one to keep the locks on the door of her room in case she might return. She will fall, she will go under, she will be swept downstream. She tips

backwards onto her heels and stands steady, pulse going hard, arms stretched out like wings to hold her still. She stands and there is the smell of sun cream and salt and something passes by, close enough that she feels skin on her skin, breath on her face. She says Ruth's name and she is certain, although later the certainty will drift, that there is an answer.

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Min

He has been crouched in the blind for so long that his legs have gone to sleep. He shifts to one side to try to release the pressure and closes his eyes against the tick of pins and needles from the blood returning. When he opens his eyes there is a hare on the flat field in front of him. He moves to record it and then stops. The hare is very large and it is looking straight at him.

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Ori

When she looks down the river is touching the baby's feet. Her pockets are filled with stones and there are stones, also, in the metal bowl which she holds. She puts the bowl down onto the surface and it floats. She lowers her hands into the water, fingers first, and then the palms. The metal bowl moves on the current and the stones inside it rattle anxiously. She is supposed to remember something. She has missed or forgotten something. She takes one of the stones from the island out of her pocket and she brings it hard against the metal bowl, which shivers on the surface of the water. The sound goes up into the sky and into her lungs. She does it again and again, bringing the small, hand-smoothed stone against the metal bowl. It is such a loud sound. She waits. There is nothing. That's not true: there is the river. She takes another step forward.

Jupjaapun

She leaves the lorry blocking the narrow road and she goes down towards the little house. There are no lights on in the windows. The house has a steeped roof and a grubby-looking camper van parked outside, the wheels taken off. There is a buggy left out the front, the seat wet with rain. She holds her hand near the door and then she knocks three times. She feels very sick and also very clear and awake. She knocks again but there is no answer. She is sleeping, JP thinks, she and the baby that the woman told Leo about are sleeping. It is nearly six o'clock. She goes around the side of the house. At the back there are flat fields stretching away. The garden is overgrown and dying in the freezing air. When she passes across the back of the house she sees that the rear door is wide open. She stands in the doorway and calls inside.

Don't be afraid, hello? Hello?

There is no answer. When she steps inside the kitchen smells like stale milk and burnt toast, there are muddy footprints on the floor, dirty nappies on the side. She goes through the house, not calling out now, feeling uncertain and anxious and bad, a foul taste in her mouth. The house is empty. She comes back downstairs and stands just outside the kitchen door. She will go back to the lorry and wait there; she will go back to the lorry and drive home and she will come back when it is light. She starts moving towards the front of the house, across the hardened icy ground, but there is a sound, somewhere over the inky flats, that halts her. She listens to it for a moment and then she starts down through the overgrown garden and away from the house. Now and then she pauses and listens out for the sound again and it comes, sometimes distant and muffled, sometimes very clear. She goes on, hands shoved into her pockets, beginning to move faster, a rise of panic in her throat.

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Ruth

The sound of Dylan's arm breaking was a snap. Ruth is wearing the birthday dress with the too tight sleeves. Marvin is smoking rollies on the bonnet of his car. The ambulance comes quickly and throws its blue wash across the faces of the houses.

On either side of the river there are fields and little stony beaches, places that the older kids go to hang out and drink. She wonders if they are there now and if she could find them. She cannot go home yet. She crosses a field and down towards the place where a tributary of the river reverses upon itself, narrowing. The meadow is high. A brace of nettles leaves itchy spots on her calves that she scratches hard with her blunted, dirty nails. There are the remains of a campfire, the ground scorched. She lies on her back on the thick grass. Insects crawl up the stalks around her. A noise, and a heron crosses the sky above her head, ragged bent wings, neat legs. She sits up and a motion catches her eye further down the river. There is someone in the water. Ruth stands up to see better. The person is already in up to their knees. She follows the curve of the riverbank towards them. From the top of the wooden stile she can see that it is a woman, moving forward quite steadily now, beneath an overhang of willows. There is something on her front that Ruth identifies slowly as a baby in a sling. She gets down off the stile and makes it to the part of the river where the willows grow. The woman is ahead of her in the water, not looking back. She is wearing her coat even on this, the warmest day of the last five years. There is no beach here to enter the river, only a messy grassy bank that Ruth, without thinking, ploughs off from, dropping into the river, which is surprisingly, chillingly cold; splashing up into her mouth so that she tastes mud, iron.

When she raises her head, the woman is gone. Ruth splashes forward, takes a breath, goes under. There is a chug of kicked-up silt, her own white hands like darting fish, the bubbles streaming from her and up to the

surface. She crashes out for air, goes back down. She cannot find the woman. She resurfaces, breathes, returns, repeats.

Something is different. The water is salty and has a strong current. When she reaches out she finds hands that tighten around her own and she kicks hard and comes up to the surface and the woman who is not just any woman, the woman who is Ori, grown older, lost, comes with her.

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Ori

On the bank behind her there is a noise, muffled. She spins. It is a woman in a pair of jeans too big for her and a yellow mackintosh torn at the elbows and around the pocket, a thick blue jumper beginning to unravel at the sleeves. She does not recognise her straight away. She opens her mouth to shout at her to get away from that place. The woman moves a bit closer down the path. Ori sees that the woman's feet are bare and muddy, the trousers rolled up nearly to the knee. It is her. The river surges and pulls at her, wants to take her. Her mother's hands are reaching out towards her now from the bank. She is telling her something. She has come back to tell her that she did not leave her, she did not mean to leave her; she has come back to tell Ori that there is a way forward, out of wordlessness. Is that right? Ori stumbles and nearly goes down onto her knees and when she looks up her mother is gone.

Someone is running into the water, shouting her name. The person is in the water with her now, grabbing at her, pulling at her arms, taking her back to the bank. She is so stunned that she lets them lead her. The baby has jerked awake and is beginning to moan in confusion. The person pulls her up onto the bank and they fall down heavily into the mud. When she looks down at the river she sees that the metal bowl has been taken by the current. She is shaking with cold. She touches the baby's feet, they are wet. She strips his slippers off, holds his chilly feet in her hands. The person next to her is rubbing at her arms with their hands, trying to warm her, they are saying her name. She raises her face and looks at them and she knows them. It is JP. JP is saying her name over and over again.

Ori

The baby wakes up as they walk back towards the house and he starts to cry. She shushes him with her hands, smoothing his hair and rubbing his cheeks, rubbing his little feet to warm them. She is beginning to shake with the cold. She feels the river behind her. It cuts through the land like a knife and there is still great easeful possibility in the thought that she could stop walking, turn around and go back. Except that JP is there with her. She has her arm around Ori's shoulders as they walk, their hips bumping together. They lift one foot and then the other and they do not stop. They keep going. They go away from the river. JP smells like the cold and like coffee and though Ori cannot remember everything she begins to remember a little. The fact of JP's existence goes in and out of her and she cannot quite hold it.

They go into the house. JP says her name again and again and wraps her up, starts to dry her. They do not know what to do with themselves. Ori cannot speak to her, she cannot look away from her. JP is in Min's house with her and the baby.

The front door opens and someone comes loudly in, shouting out. It is Eva. Ori crosses the hallway quickly and takes Eva's hands. The baby has woken and is crying and Eva lifts him from Ori's arms and holds him. Looking at her, Ori does not know what to say. There is too much to say, she has lost the words. She is crying now and Eva is crying now and the baby is crying. She thinks of that night at the pub when they pretended to be other people to one another, strangers, and how they are strangers now, reaching out and reaching out, and she holds Eva and waits.

Part Fourteen

THE RIVER DASH AGAIN

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The Island

The island, not gently, is going. This is the way it arrives. Rivers of blue ice with a moving song of creaking and cracking. The ice grinds against the earth and wears it down to hard rock, changes the shape of the country. The ice melts, floods the low land. There are mountain hares with thick white coats who have never seen a human even in their dreams. A thin stretch of higher ground remains. It is battered by the current which scalps in, and if once a hare might have been able to walk from the mainland to the island, they no longer can. The ice retreats. There are forests and forest hares with brown coats. The humans walk here for the first time and hunt reindeer. Fishermen – who come to the island for the shoals of the herring who move like lightning and are hauled up – bring hares over in their boats. The hares are like fish on land, so fast. There is a fire beacon to warn ships off the rocks, then there is a stone lighthouse and at the same time the cliffs are slipping into the sea, here they go, hear the crash of them and how the birds whirr up into the sky. Hares die and live and die. One of the men who works in the stone lighthouse likes to read and he folds the page of his book down to keep his place. The sharply folded page resembles, although he cannot know this, the folded page in the book which Edith will one day find. The lighthouse no longer needs anyone to run it and then the routes the ships take change and no one, any longer, needs the lighthouse. Hares live and die and live and die. The seas get higher and some seasons the waves are as big as they have ever been, in all the years, and the cliffs are battered and the island gets smaller. How could it be that such a place gets smaller? How could it be that a baby presses a foot against the skin of a taut belly and then, one day, lifts the heavy weight of the television and throws it through the window? Ruth dreams her way home to the island before she has ever been there. The dream is a sharply folded page, slicing apart the years. Ruth takes a long time to fall and then she is gone. No one goes to

the island again. On the mainland it is not possible to hear the sound the cliffs make as they crumble and, one day, take the lighthouse down with them. Beneath the rock the tunnels are a labyrinth that fill and empty of water, like blood in and out of the heart, and the fast-changing shape of the island causes a cave that had been blocked to be opened, the sea making quick – diastole, systole, diastole, systole – work of this new route so that what is left of Ruth is taken out to sea. The parts of Ruth are ground up and scattered. Edith takes the keys to the church and leaves them on the desk and then gets into her car. Ori and Eva's son – who they call Little Leo – carries clean jam jars carefully down to the river near Min's house. JP is there, waving, wild-haired, in welly boots; she has procured a large net. Min has seen frogspawn here and sent them to find it. Little Leo and JP move as quietly as they can, lifting their heavy feet and placing them carefully, bending aside the thick reeds. Little Leo holds the jam jar and JP holds the net. They wade in further. Uh oh, Little Leo says, because the water has gone over the tops of his boots and filled them, then, oh there! He has seen them, not frogspawn anymore but black darting tadpoles. JP splashes forward with the net but when she looks back for Little Leo she sees that he has sat down, the water to his chest, and is holding his hands out to the tadpoles. Sometimes Little Leo likes to touch the C-section scar with his finger. Eva tells him they conceived of him before he even existed, they dreamed a way to him. He points to a tadpole now and says, is that what sperm looks like? Yeah, JP says, trying to scoop with the net and then giving up and plopping down beside him. He has a lot of questions about everything. Why do teeth fall out? What does *agree to disagree* mean? What happens when we die? What is left of Ruth is in the sea now and then it is in the river. Edith stumbles into the river. Ori wades in and stands and waits. Little Leo feels the tickling of the tadpoles as they go up his trouser legs. Ruth feels the baby starting to come, a star of pain, and walks into the river and stands and waits. At the house, packing their things up to move home to the cottage, Ori feels the hospital on the walls and floors and ceiling, returned, as it sometimes is. Some commotion from the other room where Eva and Big Leo are wrapping plates, doing a bad job, tearing the newspaper so that it scatters, like confetti like snow. Edith, on hands and knees, tears the pages of the encyclopaedia and it is like snow, obliterating everything. They go on. The sea rises, covers the island. It is out of sight.

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Acknowledgements

Every book takes a village, this one took a city.

The fictional research on hares dreaming is inspired by the work of Matthew A. Wilson and Bruce L. McNaughton.

This book owes a debt to many writers who wrote about their experience of parenthood, among them: Adrienne Rich, Lucy Jones, Helen Jukes, Miranda July, Tom de Freston, Julie Phillips, Lisa Baraitser, Audre Lorde and Sarah Ruhl.

Chris, I'm not sure there are words to describe how grateful I am for your dedication to this book. Thank you for your patience and perception and hard work. We would not have got here without your determination.

Thank you to everyone at Aitken Alexander who continues to work so hard for my books. A special thanks to Lesley, Fran, Lisa, Anna and Talia.

This book owes enormous thanks to its many readers and editors. Sarah, thank you for believing in this when it was only a sentence and for allowing its many changing shapes, it has been quite a journey. Michal, thank you for your early thoughts and trust. Ana, what a joy to have your eye on the words again. Hannah, it has been such a pleasure to work with you on this, thank you for treating it with such care.

Thanks to Jessie for her impeccable publicity skills and to Leeza for her editorial eye. Thank you to Gemma for copy-editing so meticulously. Thank you to Suzanne for her astounding work on all my covers. Thank you to everyone at Jonathan Cape, Vintage and Riverhead Books. Enormous thanks, also, to every publisher and translator who has worked so hard to bring my books into the world.

Tom, this book would never have come into focus without your enormously generous thoughts, especially on those hands reaching across the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Thank you, my dear friend.

Kiran and Sarvat, thank you for your patience in reading this again and again and again and offering such help and strength, both in writing and in life.

Nell, it has been wonderful to descend into writing and motherhood with you. Here's to many more books.

Jess, thank you for this decade of friendship, here's to another.

Jonny, Rosie, Sylvia and Esme, how lucky the Johnson-Bradshaws are to have you!

To the Bradshaws for their help and love these last five years.

To the Johnsons and the adopted Johnsons who are my river and carry me along over rough ground. In particular to Tiggy and Pa, who were there at the start of the words.

To J. S. for all her wisdom.

TC and Oskie, my beautiful ones, I love you, all the words are for you.

Matt, we're doing it.

This book was born out of grief and exhaustion but it became, as it changed, a book of hope. It is my knocking stones, reaching out to you.

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First published by Jonathan Cape in 2026

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ISBN: 978-1-529-92664-4

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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