

When the world is burning, it's easy to forget about ice.

Easy for most people, that is. I knew nothing but freeze for over a year. I lived with the ice, on the ice, inside it – locked on the island as the rest of the world grew desperate with rage and disease. As the missiles fell and cities were blasted by a thousand-degree heat, I struggled to keep warm.

Frostbite and a chill so keen it cuts right through the heart: that's the price of survival.

Then what?

After everyone else was dead, I sat by a window for three days watching the glacier creak and break. When I took off my trousers, my skin flaked away and my legs itched. I scratched at the dead skin until I was pink and sore, then I got dressed again.

I thought about the scientists who had vanished into a crevasse twenty years earlier and were never found, how their little bodies would one day tumble out of the glacier's mouth like babies being born, frozen solid and perfectly preserved in their brightly coloured thermals.

People used to think that ice is white, but it isn't. There is all kinds of history inside it, waiting to be brought out.

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The beach tastes of skin and salt. Sand clogs my mouth and grinds against my teeth. When I move my hand I can feel the grains shifting beneath it.

Slowly, I lift my head. I sit up and cough. It starts in my throat, in the sand and spume still rattling in my oesophagus – then it expands, rising and billowing until I'm coughing from my stomach up, till my whole body is racked with it. I cough till I vomit on the sand, again, and again, and again, till all I can bring up is bile.

Wiping my mouth on my sleeve, I take several deep breaths.

This is where the sea spat me out.

To the right, a broad belt of sand stretches for miles, into the mist and sea spray of the horizon. In front, following the line of the beach, a low cliff is dotted with trees and seagulls. The gulls nestle on ledges and wheel overhead, screeching. Every rock is covered, streaked white and grey. The noise is horrendous. After the deep quiet of Svalbard, it feels like an assault. I had forgotten how noisy life could be.

Beyond the diving gulls, where the cliff meets the pregnant grey sky, is a line of coarse bracken and heather. Like the trees, these plants look hardy and gnarled, gripping onto the rock face with old men's fingers.

My own hands are red and rough from weeks in the cold, the knuckles inflamed, the fingers sinewy and chapped. When I flex them, I can feel pockets of air clicking between the cartilage. My mother had pianist's fingers, elegant and slender, her nails shaped and painstakingly buffed. My hands are better.

I look to my left, where a cluster of rocks catches the sea

and whirls it around, so the waves come crashing back towards the beach. Which is how I ended up here, of all places.

I turn to the sea and there it is: the boat, my boat, beached and broken on the rocks a short way out, rocking with the swell. Or rather, what's left of the boat.

If I were a nautical person, I suppose I would say *she* instead of *it*. I might stand on the lonely shore and regret that I did not go down with her. But I'm not.

When I haul myself to my feet, the whole right side of my body smarts where the sea and rocks have battered me. I take another deep breath. I have not survived this long only to die on a shit-splattered beach in Scotland.

I wade back out into the undertow. It tugs at my feet, smaller now than the fierce grip of the storm, but still there – an echo.

I expect the boat to be nothing but timbers and a few sodden relics, but for the first time in weeks, lightness fills my lungs like bellows. The cabin is still intact.

I stuff what I can into my backpack and carry it aloft back to shore. I remember seeing a film as a child where a warrior fording a river had to carry his sword above his head to keep it dry, the weapon his most valued possession, raised high like a benediction. This is my benediction: a backpack full of clothes, food, a sleeping bag, two rolls of Elastoplast, a Swiss army knife, rope, a lighter. This is what will keep me alive.

I make four more trips out to the boat, bringing back whatever else I can salvage, reclaiming food then breaking off dry bits of wood. Back on the beach, I kindle a fire above the tideline. Forget mourning her passing – I burn her bones to keep me warm.

Once stripped of my dripping, salt-soaked clothes and changed into ones that are merely damp, I scour the beach for anything else that may have washed ashore. I gather carrier bags, two odd socks that I dry by the fire, a plastic bottle,

string. I lay out my collection in military rows in the sand, and the rows become a calendar, marking out the limits of my time. If I do not find anything else, I have only eight days left to survive.

I pull out my sleeping bag and am asleep before the sun has set.

By the time I wake, the fire has died and the remains of the boat have been claimed by the sea. I eat some of the more perishable food, pack my backpack and lace up my boots. As I climb the shallow cliff, the gulls shriek and divebomb, but I ignore them.

I reach the top and start to walk.

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I walk because somewhere there must be food and water. I walk to seek out shelter. I choose a destination because otherwise the possibility of *anywhere* is too big.

My parents lived around forty miles from Scotland. The Scottish mainland is roughly three hundred miles long. I do not know where I have washed up, but if I manage an average of ten miles a day, I should be home inside a month.

Of course it will take me much longer than that. I will get lost. As much as possible, I will avoid towns and cities. I will avoid their bombed and broken buildings, and their Sickness-ridden bodies lurking like a virus already in the bloodstream.

I will leave the roads, clogged with the cars of all those who tried to flee from explosions or infestations, those who had not already been claimed by the War or the Sickness that rose out of it, those who tried to reach the so-called Safe Centres before they shut their gates. Who knows how many shells are lying unexploded on the tarmac? Who knows what kinds of explosives or gases or diseases they might contain?

I will stick to fields and moorland and heaths. Nature always was a more predictable place – though even then there will be obstacles to overcome. There will be places to stop and search for food, and the unavoidable ritual of living. Survival is time-consuming.

Still it sits somewhere at the base of my belly, this drive to return. I am like a homing pigeon, pulled back to the place it was fed and watered and kept safe from prowling foxes, even though its keeper is no longer there to care for it. I suppose it is a pilgrimage of sorts. A sacrifice meted out in aches and

blisters – an absolution. I need to see for myself that my parents are gone.

I dream about it sometimes. Not home itself, but the journey, the perpetual striving. In my dreams, I climb the hill behind my parents' house, or I drag my feet along the lane that leads to their village, but I always wake just before I arrive. There is always further to go.

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My father called me Monster. It was supposed to be ironic, I think – an affectionate joke.

As I got older, my mother tried to change it, but by then the name had solidified around me. It was a shame, she said, for such a pretty child to have an ugly name.

My mother often lamented that I didn't fit my cherub cheeks and curls. Her name was Beatrice and she wore it like an elegant fur coat. As for me, I grew into my name and out of my curls. I think it takes a monster to survive when nobody else can.

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I sit on a crumbling rock at the edge of a copse, where the air still smells of sea.

The fields here are wide and flat, and there is a feeling of height. The ground seems to go only as far as the nearest wall, and then into a cold sky beyond. I watch bright clouds scud across the horizon until it feels as though the whole world is moving.

For a moment, I can almost believe there was no War, no Sickness, no inevitable Last Fall. Then my eye lingers on the tangle of weeds growing over the bottom of the five-bar gate, part of the faint air of neglect that has settled over everything, human control succumbing to plant-life as the War forced people into towns and the Sickness swept through what remained of the villages.

A blister as big as a five pence coin has bubbled up on my right heel. I pop it between my nails and a clear liquid leaks across my thumb. I sit with cold air stinging the raw skin, until I'm numb from sitting. Then I stick a plaster on my heel and put my boot back on.

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When I was five, I started to squirrel things under my bed in my mother's old shoe boxes. Little things, the flotsam and jetsam of daily life: spare plugs, old phones, the toaster that was supposed to be thrown out. I sat straining my eyes by the desk lamp, fiddling and tinkering until they worked again, or until I could piece the parts together into something new. I fell in love with the honesty of objects, how they thrived or failed based on their own mechanical truth. On rainy days, I would lay out all the pieces on my bedroom floor just to gaze at them. I knew their ridges and grooves intimately.

My screws and wires were my company. In the playground, I fought the girls who whispered behind my back and cold-shouldered the boys who prodded me in the side and sometimes claimed to want to be my friend. When Callum Jenkins slouched over one lunchtime to tell me I was 'cool for a girl', I bit his arm until I tasted blood.

As a teenager I became volatile and fierce, snapping at neighbours who asked about my favourite subjects, turning a sullen eye on critical aunts and uncles. I swore loudly at the gaggle of cousins who came to visit. My mother bought me a book: *How to Start Conversations and Make Friends*. I told her to fuck off.

By the time I was sixteen, I had taught myself how to be Monster.

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For two days it rains. I take shelter in a bothy, by a gushing stream that threatens to burst its banks. The only wood I can find is rotted through and slimy to the touch, impossible to make a fire from. I spend all day cocooned in my sleeping bag, reliant on the scant protection of four walls and a dripping roof. The flaking plaster is black with mildew and there is a smell of dead rats. In the shut-in dark, it's too easy to remember the Seed Vault. It's too easy to think of Erik, wide-eyed and afraid in the pressing underground chamber of the vault. Then the silence, and the world crumbling outside. I close my eyes and focus on the noise of rain.

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The grass is patchy, the earth wet and cloying. It clings to my boots as I squelch through it, making them heavy with mud. I drop down behind a hill and am confronted by a village. A mean thing – a dozen old stone houses hunkered in a glen. The place still has an air of isolation and hellish winters, and for a while I stand at a distance and just look.

There are no noises except the half-hearted gusting of wind through trees. The village itself is still and huddled as a dead thing. At the furthest edge, a patch of burnt ground like a footprint. If I hold my hand at arm's length, I can block out the whole sorry lot of it.

I have two days left before I run out of food.

Just once, as a teenager, I caught my mother in my bedroom, her flower-printed back to the door, fingers flicking through the pilfered things in my shoe box, turning them up to the light and putting them unceremoniously back.

That is what entering this village is like. I open doors to the houses and inside them I open cupboards and inside the cupboards I open boxes and tins. At every act of opening, I turn the hidden places up to the light and feel part of myself recoil. Everywhere I look, there are books or photographs or withered house-plants – all the flotsam that once made pieces of a life. If places could move, these would scurry from my entering them like woodlice on an upturned rock.

I try not to look too much, to break down these houses in my mind the way I might break down a machine into its functioning parts, so that I see each building only as a series

of potential food stores, so I limit my attention to where supplies might be. I do not know how much I succeed, but I emerge from the last house with half a packet of oats, a tub of lentils, some tins and a box of not-quite luxury chocolates I decant into a bag. My pack is heavy, but my calendar of survival grows a little longer.

I follow a road so rough and potholed it is really no more than a track, skirting the bottom of a hill. A small bridge crosses a brook, and I dip down to fill my water bottles. Two of the tins clink together in my pack as I scramble back up the bank.

A few miles further on, my rutted strip of tarmac arrives at a wider road, with grass verges and a dotted white line along the centre. The signpost points to a town in one direction, a nature reserve in the other. I stop to drink from my water bottle, balancing the possibility of food and shelter against the need for emptiness and open space. I think about what a town might mean – like the village but bigger, an unbearable cavity, cluttered with all the paraphernalia of what my mother might have called ‘normal people’: people who followed the rules, who had families and a community, who stuck so hard to their so-called loved ones they eventually let it kill them.

I think about my parents, like two satellites with incompatible programming, but orbiting on the same trajectory. I try not to think about Erik, his fatal need for human touch. When there is nobody else, it is easier to think about hating people than about wanting them.

In the War and in the Sickness that followed, so many people depended too much on those they cared about. But survival has a cost. It has always had a cost, and the cost is being alone, cutting out friends and family like a cancerous

growth and sealing the wound behind them. And if you pay the greatest price, you get to survive the longest – which is why there is only me, and why I must keep walking.

I test the weight of the new supplies on my back, and head away from the town.

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The ground is icy now. I leave the road and trek across fields. The frozen grass crunches under my boots. All around me, the world is wide and silver, like the painting of winter my parents had in the back bedroom. I walk with my face covered to protect myself from the cold. I can feel it in my toes and the tips of my fingers. Every day I hug my arms around my chest and am thankful for my thermal clothes. At night I light a fire and sleep as close to it as I dare.

When my toes go numb, I stamp the feeling back into them. When my mind starts to wander, when the immense unpeopled emptiness tugs at my thoughts and tries to scatter them, when the wind ruffling the reeds is the sound of Erik's voice echoing in the Seed Vault – I count my steps. I focus on the rhythm and it almost pulls me back.

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They used to say survival came in threes, that a person could survive three days without water, three weeks without food, three months without company.

At two months and twenty-one days I stopped counting. I didn't want to know the moment that loneliness would mature into insanity. I didn't want to know when I had finally become a madwoman.

Perhaps I am mad now. Perhaps none of this is real, and I'm still trapped in the Seed Vault and this world is all my own construction. I think that only a mind like mine could create such a world. When I look at broken houses baring their pipes and wires and inner workings to the outside world, I think only I could invent such mechanical detail.

When I was a child I did have one friend. Harry Symmonds.

Harry Symmonds built models out of cocktail sticks and cried when other children touched his things. Harry Symmonds, who I smacked on the side of the head one day at school – who decided that a blow to the face was an act of friendship and followed me home.

I made him wait outside on the step until my mother realised and I had to let him in.

'Take him upstairs and show him your collection,' she said.

So I did, because I had to. I unfolded all the wires and rawl plugs and pilfered things onto the bedroom carpet and warned him not to touch any of it, and his eyes shone round.

By that time I had started to create my museum in the back half of the garden shed: a motley gathering of old bones from the surrounding fields. Bird and small mammal bones, mostly,

scrubbed clean or left sprouting with moss, each one accompanied by a neat little card documenting the date and location of its finding. Once, for two whole weeks, the museum exhibited a dead rat, damp fur and tail still clinging to its bones, until the maggots broke out and it had to be thrown in the bin.

The pride of this collection was the sheep skull: gorgeous and whole and noble, with elegant curling horns like German braids. I showed it to Harry Symmonds and he looked at it for a long time, scuffing up his shoes on the grubby floorboards. I refused to let him touch it.

Harry Symmonds, who took all the meanness I ever threw at him and never threw anything back, who wouldn't separate himself from me for the next four years, because I smacked or bit any child who came too close, and that protection made it worth braving my battering jibes. By the time we reached secondary school, Harry Symmonds was ignored by everybody, and I had become his hard-shelled beetle with no soft underbelly. Once or twice, some of the boys would call Harry Symmonds my boyfriend and tell me I was pretty, then laugh as they catcalled and pretended to swoon. I spat back. In woodwork, when Robin Fell made a crude joke about nailing, I struck a precise tack through the skin between his thumb and forefinger – and later, Harry Symmonds joined me in insisting Robin had nailed his own hand to the desk by accident.

Harry Symmonds, who I didn't like or dislike, but tolerated, because I found that thinking was easier when there was someone to talk at. Harry Symmonds, proving even then that survival is easier in pairs.

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This morning I buried a sparrow. I don't know what made me do it.

It was outside a once-whitewashed crofter's cottage at the foot of a mountain. I thought there could be food in the kitchen – instead I found a table set with two tea cups, each one lined with a fuzzy green and white mould. Upstairs, damp curtains blew at an open window, and something lay sprawled in the middle of the bed. As I entered the room, I upset the flurry of crows that had gathered to steal its softer parts. They cawed and scuffled and scratched at me as I barrelled backwards.

Scarf tight over my nose and mouth, I checked the empty kitchen cupboards and left.

As I stepped back onto the road, I crunched something into the tarmac. A sparrow – a small speckled bump on the wet black road, trying vainly to lift its head and chirrup. I bent down to scoop it up. It was soft and firm, like a tennis ball. It quivered in my hands – a bundle of terrified warmth.

At the end of the last century, London lost three-quarters of its sparrows in just six years – one of those facts I read and inexplicably remembered – and nobody really cared. So what difference did another sparrow make?

But it was as if a cloud had stuffed itself into my throat – I struggled to breathe, felt my eyes go sharp. I fell to the road and clutched this ordinary bird to my chest.

Maybe it was because of the broken wing, or the matchstick feet dangling from its juddering stomach. Maybe because this was the first living body I had touched in weeks.

I put it out of its misery with a rock from the edge of the road, then buried it as best I could in a dip by the wall. I didn't leave a marker – who was there to find it? I carried on walking south.

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Growing up, I never understood the need for touch, for desire, for other people's bodies – the way these things gushed into everyday life, unstoppable, till they permeated every layer of people's existence. On television and on the sides of buses, people kissed or embraced or touched parts of their own skin. In my mother's magazines, boys strolled along the beach sporting swimming trunks and superhero muscles. The girls posed in skimpy bikinis and pretended not to look at the camera.

When I was thirteen, my mother sent me into town with money for my birthday. I snuck into a clothes shop on the high street, thrilling with trepidation. The halogen lighting and bulging rails seemed to be everywhere, till they were a barrage, pushing in at me on all sides. As a shop assistant in heavy eye make-up sashayed over, I grabbed the first bikini I saw and ducked into the changing rooms, pulling the curtains tight up to the edges to make sure nobody could see in. With my back to the mirror, I changed.

I cannot remember what I wanted. I do not know what I expected to happen, or what part of me had thought this might be a good idea. I only remember looking nothing like the girls in my mother's magazines.

The top sat flatly over my chest. In magazines, the women always had long hair that cascaded over their shoulders and made everything else look curved and in proportion. My short rough hair made my neck look too long, and there was too much bareness. My skin was pale and mottled. In the shop lighting, it was almost blue, except for my face and arms, which were red from sun and windburn, and made my body

look disconnected. The bikini bottom cut into the line around my groin. It made my legs stick out, like those branches that grow too big in the wrong directions and need propping up with wooden stakes to stop the whole tree collapsing. In the gusset, the protective plastic strip was hard and uncomfortable, and crinkled when I moved.

I bought it out of spite. At home, I stuffed it down the gap at the back of my chest of drawers, where it haunted my teenage years like the ghosts of all the women in my mother's magazines.

At school, some of the boys had started to spend their lunch money on newspapers with pictures of topless girls in them. These pictures would end up stuffed in people's lockers, or tucked unexpectedly into exercise books, or shoved at you as you walked between classrooms to raucous yells of 'Tits on your face!'

I hunched over, avoided their eyes. I stopped watching films and I avoided looking at the pictures of models in shop windows. I learned to walk without attracting attention.