

THE
*End of the
World*
RUNNING
CLUB

ADRIAN J WALKER



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*For Debbie,
Bailey and Joseph*

Belief

Beliefs are strange. Things of certainty about things uncertain. Take mine, for example. I believe there are graves in the field next to the house where I live. I stop at the fence every morning and I look at three lashed crosses standing crooked against the sea, and I believe I know who is buried beneath them.

But I can't be sure. So I believe instead. I suppose I could dig them up, but, as I see it, there are only two ways that little enterprise can end and neither of them is particularly palatable. Besides, if you have to go round digging up graves to prove your own sanity then you've probably already lost it.

This house, and the cliff to which it clings, is falling down. I believe that I came here on a road that was drowning in mud, that I climbed stairs from a deserted beach to join that road, that I swam to that beach from a small boat and sat there shivering beneath a gathering storm, watching the boat sail back the way it had come. I believe that I arrived at that boat after following a series of roads through a country that was torn apart, washed away and burned down to its raw rock. I believe that I wasn't alone.

My memory stretches into the past like this, filament thin, a string of flickering flames, each one connected to the next. Some burn strong and bright, others barely glimmer.

The line between any two points in your life is liable to be strange and unfathomable, a tangle of chance and tedium.

But some points seem to have clearer connections, even ones that are far from each other, as if they have a direct line that bypasses the normal run of time. I remember things that no longer make any sense; events from yesterday that may as well have happened to a different person. Other things from many years ago still seem to be echoing now. I can smell Beth's perfume in that crowded party and feel the warmth of her knee as she pressed it mischievously against mine, telling me that this was going to lead somewhere else, that her face was going to be a part of my life from then on. I can still hear the clatter of metal and the squeak of the hospital bed as Alice was passed to me, still feel the bucket inside of me emptying, the panic rising in my breath as Beth's was filled with relief in her final contractions.

I can still feel the sun of an English summer, smell the warm grass that brushed against my boyhood face, hear my mother's voice calling beneath the gentle hum of a single-engined aeroplane.

I believe what I believe to make life less terrifying. That's all beliefs are: stories we tell ourselves to stop being afraid. Beliefs have very little to do with the truth.

I don't know. Belief, memory, fear – these things hold you back, weigh you down, stop you moving. And I need to get moving. I need to stop thinking about this stuff. That's what Harvey would say – *stop thinking, keep moving*. But it's hard to stop thinking when there's nobody else but you and a candle and an old house on the crumbling coast of a ruined country. Maybe that's why I'm writing this down – so I can stop thinking about it and get moving.

So I need a place to start. I may as well start at the end.

The End

I heard my name called. Once, twice, then a third time louder. I jerked awake. I was sitting down; my arms were folded, stiff with inaction. The air was full of noise and movement. Screams, colours flashing by, something tugging at my trouser leg. I tried to focus. A red, urgent face was looking down on me, shouting.

'Ed!'

I croaked something, prised my lips apart and tried to work some moisture back into the foul pit that was my mouth. Beth gradually came into focus. She sighed and looked me up and down, blew a wet ringlet of hair from her forehead. A vague mixture of disappointment and disgust flickered across her face.

'Look after Arthur,' she said. I frowned. 'Our son,' she said. 'Your *heir*.' She pulled back her lips on this last word. I glanced down at Arthur, halfway up my shin, eyes wide as he prepared to attach his gums to my knee. 'I'm taking Alice on the big slide.'

It was Saturday afternoon, the day before it happened. I was badly hungover from after-work beers and we were at Cheeky Monkeys, probably the worst place to find yourself in such a state. Cheeky Monkeys was a vast indoor soft-play arena of gigantic foam climbing frames, nets, plastic slides and – most notably – children. A hundred or more of them, fully fuelled,

fully wired, clambering, crawling, clawing and yowling up ladders, across rope bridges and around the padded maze. Parents trailed behind them, lumbering on all fours through the hot fug of their own offspring like damned souls in some long-forgotten circle of hell. Others, those who had been temporarily spared this doom, stood about in groups drinking tea and energy drinks; women with dark-ringed eyes compared notes and cackled, packs of men grinned like loons, as they rushed to take photographs of their little ones on their phones, their bellies bursting through T-shirts designed for teenagers.

Or men sat in the corner, like me, trying to sleep off the nine pints of strong lager that were still dribbling through an empty stomach.

I picked up Arthur and got to my feet, and was immediately hit by a head rush that sent me careering into a table of three scowling teenage mothers. One tutted. I mumbled some apology and staggered away from them, dropped Arthur into the baby's section and fell back into my seat again, breathless. I watched him. He looked around for a bit, then crawled over to another little boy and began a wordless dispute over a plastic hammer. Another child cried as she was pushed head first off a bean bag by a red-faced sibling. Everywhere I looked there was some kind of conflict, infants disagreeing, trying to lay their own boundaries, little souls crashing together. All that noise and clamour; life beginning as it meant to go on – a struggle. Fighting down my own stale bile, I watched it all and wondered what any man might wonder at any given moment of his life: how the hell did I get here?

The truth was that I was thirty-five and caught in my own headlock. I believed that I – Edgar Hill, husband, father of two

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young children, homeowner, Englishman, full-time employee of a large, self-serving corporation, the name of which was soon to be scorched forever from its office walls – was the product of a sick environment, a civilisation that had failed beyond hope. I wondered daily how we had ever even made it this far. It was a joke, pointless. How could we look after a planet when we couldn't even look after our own countries, our own towns, our own communities?

Our own families. Our own selves.

Our own bodies. Our own heads.

I was only halfway to the age when it's OK to feel lethargic, cold, bitter and confused, and yet I felt those things every minute of every day. I was overweight. I ate double portions, drank double measures, avoided exercise. I was inflating like a balloon on an abandoned gas cylinder. My world perplexed me – every day was a haze of confusion. My job grated my very core. My marriage gave me vertigo. And my kids ... well ... I wasn't what you'd call the most-engaged father. I went through the motions alright, but let's just say there are lots of urgent things you can find to do around the home and it's amazing how long it can take sometimes to put out the bins. Don't get me wrong, I loved my wife and I loved my kids, but that doesn't mean to say I had to be happy about it. For me, then at least, being a husband and father meant being simultaneously exhausted and terrified. I was like a man on a cliff edge, nodding off.

Love my wife. *Love* my kids. You have to take care with your tenses when the world ends.

Later, after the hell of Cheeky Monkeys, we drove home on roads shimmering with heat. The sky had that bright

and colourless sheen that you only see in cities during the summer. The volume of traffic had tripled for the weather. We got stuck at a roundabout and I watched through my open window as car after car swept onto it from the right, blocking our path. There was no end to them, they just kept coming. Alice was screaming in the back about some vague injustice while Beth, twisted back in her seat, tried to placate her. Arthur started up too. Horns blared out behind me to get going, but there was no room for me to move. I sat there, helpless, as the traffic mounted behind. The kids' yells got worse and I felt Beth bristling next to me. Still the cars sped by, endless, a swollen sea of souls washing past the wind-screen. I lost focus on the stream of traffic and let the sound of car horns, engines and screams merge until all around me was a smear of colour and noise. I closed my eyes and saw the earth from above, the biosphere stretched across its surface like cling film and the human race like mayonnaise trapped within. Bacteria, sludge; an ever-expanding mass with nowhere to go.

'ED! GO! GO NOW!'

'Mumeeeeeee!'

I pulled out, the car stalled, a BMW X5 screeched to a halt by our bonnet and the pinched-faced, platinum-blonde horror of a woman behind the wheel began shouting and banging her hands on the dashboard. Her husband wagged a loose, open fist at me, sneering with a mouth full of greasy dead animal matter. More car horns, more screams. I raised a hand in apology and pulled away.

The truth is I was tired of it all. I was tired of the clamour and the din of a world that made less sense by the day and a life

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that had me just where it wanted. The truth is that the end of the world, for me at least, came as a relief.

Perhaps that comes across as heartless or selfish. All those people, all that horror, all that death. But was it just me? Didn't you feel the same? Couldn't you almost hear that collective sigh, sense the world's shoulders loosen? Did you find no comfort in the knowledge that the show was over, that we didn't have to keep it going any more?

Maybe it really was just me, and I suppose it's fair to say I was in a bad place back then. I was struggling. But I kept going, didn't I? I kept stumbling on, putting one foot blindly in front of the other, watching it all, filling my fat face with it all, frowning at it all, wanting it all to just go away.

Which, of course, it did.

I can't tell you exactly what happened. It took a week. One week for the country to plunge from the blissful apathy of a heatwave, through detached concern, into that strange new territory of danger, threat, panic and, finally, oblivion. It doesn't add up when you think about it. I mean, somebody must have known well before then, *must* have. If we can watch stars dying on the other side of the universe and put a robot on Mars (one who's probably now wondering why everything's gone quiet), then surely we could see those things coming.

Maybe those German astrophysics students were right. What did they call themselves? The Watchmen, I think, something like that. I was never that much into social media (all those pleas to like this, share that, validate me, laugh at me, support me, update this or upgrade that – I just couldn't take it) so I'm sketchy on the details, but about a year before

it happened The Watchmen announced on Twitter that they'd spotted something odd, something that shouldn't have been there. There was that famous picture they posted of Saturn with some blurry mark on its rings, then another one of a dark smudge across one of Jupiter's moons. The Internet pricked up its ears. NASA responded with just a few curt dismissals, but you could tell something wasn't right. Some celebrities got involved and they tried to get some scientific muscle behind them to corroborate what they'd found. Still nothing from NASA, and then they went quiet. And then there were conspiracy theories. And then they were forgotten about. Because there was a new series of *Big fucking Brother*, I expect.

Then a year went by and we were in a heatwave and that was all anyone had to talk about. And then everything happened very quickly. The survivors will always remember that week. In Scotland, any kind of appearance by the sun makes the front page, so that Monday – the one before it happened – the front pages were full of grins, short skirts and bikinis. The only real story was the happy threat of a hosepipe ban. Then an undercurrent appeared in the headlines around Wednesday: something odd, distant, unrelated to the heat. The news bulletins were so disjointed and confused that the mistakes were talked about more than the actual content of what they were trying to convey: that something very bad might be about to happen.

We laughed. Nobody really bought it. It was summer, it was hot; this had to be a joke, some kind of reality TV prank. That's what people said: 'It's a joke.' I think the supermarkets had a brief surge of cheery panic buyers, but hardly anyone really grasped what was happening. We're idiots. Creatures of

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denial who have learned not to be afraid of our closets. We need to see the monster in the room before we scream.

The monster burst in on Sunday. There was that final heart-stopping headline, there were those two blunt and terrifying words, capital letters, black on white. And *that's* when we finally got it, with no time left to prepare.

I'm not saying I thought it was a good thing and I'm not saying I thought it wasn't tragic. I'm just saying: I thought we had it coming. We'd had it coming for a long time.

I don't know what happened. Maybe the powers that be knew, maybe they didn't. Maybe they just didn't have the right telescope, maybe those things were just too small to see or track. Or maybe – just maybe – they realised we were fucked. Maybe they realised there was no way out and wanted us to enjoy the last few months we had of normality. That seems like a nice idea.

The plain fact is I don't know. All I know is that one minute you're watching your three-year-old daughter scrambling up a soft play fun-pipe, and the next you're hurling her into the cellar and slamming the hatch behind you.

All I know is that the end – in the end – came from the skies.

That Sunday I awoke from a long and difficult dream about cows. A small herd of them were stuck inside a pen, struggling to escape, their hooves sliding from each other's hides. Four or five bald men in white coats were standing around them with clipboards, watching them, prodding them, taking notes. The cows were getting more and more panicky, before one let out an almighty guttural *MEEEEEEEEERRRR* and I almost fell

out of bed. The sound still rang in my ears as I blinked in the low light and listened to my heart struggling for calm.

I looked at the clock. It was 5 a.m. and Arthur's cries were piercing the wall behind our bed. Beth groaned and elbowed my ribs. Arthur was still feeding through the night and waking early, so this was my shift, this was what I brought to the table. When his older sister, Alice, was born, I had made it very clear to Beth, very early in the proceedings, that *I* was the one who had to get up for work in the morning, that *I* was the one who needed my sleep, so no, *I* would most certainly not be helping with night feeds. I don't think I'm the first man to have ever pulled this one. It's a common enough shirk, one that conveniently ignores what *work* actually means for most men – i.e. comfy seats, tea and coffee, biscuits, nice food, adult conversation, the occasional pretty girl to ogle at, the Internet, sealed toilet cubicles where you can catch a few winks without anyone noticing. *Work*. Not like being at home breastfeeding a newborn and entertaining a two-year-old all day.

What work actually *meant* ... *those* days. Careful with those tenses.

Anyway, yes, I hold my hand up, guilty again. I insisted on my right to sleep. Beth conceded, but only on the proviso that I took the early shift on Saturdays and Sundays. I couldn't really argue with her. There's only so much you can push it with a woman who's just given birth.

I grumbled something and pulled back the duvet, knocking the empty glass of water from my bedside table. Another groan from Beth. 'Sorry,' I muttered.

These early starts had been going on since Christmas. We had tried all the advice in the books, from friends and family.

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'Let him cry it out', 'Change the bedtime routine', 'Put some water in his cot', 'Change his day-time naps', 'Fill him up with Weetabix before bedtime'. Or, from those who weren't parents: 'Can't you just ignore him?' Sure, ignore him. Ignore the thunderous screams of rage and the cot hammering against the wall as your wife's body stiffens with fury in the bed next to you, exhausted after another night of fragmented sleep.

We had called a midwife out in January. 'The main thing is not to worry,' she had said, one palm laid carefully on Beth's knee so as to avoid the various stains of sick, stewed apple and sour breast milk. 'It's just a phase, he'll grow out of it when he's good and ready.'

Beth had nodded back dutifully, sobbing quietly as Arthur drained her bruised, broken left nipple for the third time that morning. I'd been watching from the kitchen as I tried to cram cold porridge into Alice's bawling mouth. A metre of snow outside, still dark at 8.30 a.m., wondering again why we were living in fucking Scotland.

What if this all just went away? I had thought. *What if this all just blew away?*

I cringe when I remember how hard I thought life was back then. With no sleep, no sex, no time, no respite. Honestly, I thought having kids was hell. But Beth was the one who did it all. She was the one who took it all on, growing them, giving birth to them, changing more than her fair share of filthy nappies, never complaining when I snuck off to the pub or stayed up late watching telly, never complaining when I fell into bed beside her in the middle of the night, my breath heavy with wine. Beth didn't drink because of the breastfeeding, but I pretty much drank every night. I reasoned that it was my

right as a tired parent, that I worked all week to provide for my family and that it helped me relax. I told myself that a glass or two on week nights and a bit more at the weekend was fine and perfectly healthy. In reality I was pushing at least a bottle a night and two on a Saturday, not to mention the pints after work on a Friday. And exercise – who had time for that with a nine-to-five and two children? The same tired, old excuses. The truth was that, aside from a minor decrease in sleep, my body had found a way of getting what it wanted: a sedentary life with plenty of carbohydrates and relaxants. And I gave in. I learned to avoid mirrors, learned to ignore the dull shock of seeing paunch, jowls and breasts growing day by day.

I made it easy on myself, *very* easy. And that made it hard on Beth.

I have to keep telling myself not to look back so much. I'll always regret not being a better father, a better husband, but I have to look forward or else I won't get to the place I'm going and I need beyond everything else to get there. The past is a foreign country, someone once said. They do things differently there. My past – everyone's past – is now a different planet. It's so different it almost makes no sense to remember it.

But still, everyone remembers that day.

'It's just a phase,' the midwife had said on that dark winter's day all those months before. 'He'll grow out of it when he's good and ready.'

Just a phase. A phase that saved our lives.

As I waited for the microwave to heat up Arthur's milk, I poured myself a glass of water, opened the back door and stepped out onto the deck. It was another sunny day and already warm. Arthur flinched at the low sun and snuggled

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into my neck, breathing little stuttering breaths in my ear as I closed my eyes and let the warm light flood over my face. I actually felt happy. I had another hangover, of course (wine and telly on my own the night before), but I didn't mind being up so early. Maybe it was the vitamin D, maybe I was still a little drunk from the night before, or maybe it was just holding my son in a warm sunrise when nobody else was around, I don't know. Cool, still air, warm sun, the distant roar of a road somewhere ... I just felt happy. That's probably my last real memory of anything normal.

As I sat on the deck enjoying the warm sunshine and my son's quiet gurgles in my ear, a breeze suddenly whipped up around us. The plants gave a fierce rustle. The tree in the corner of the garden creaked and its branches twisted and bowed momentarily out of shape. The windows in the house rattled violently. The windows in the houses opposite rattled too. The kitchen door swung open and banged against the cupboards. It stopped. Behind the breeze came a very deep and distant rumble. A split second and then it was calm again.

Arthur gasped and looked about wide-eyed.

'What was that, Art?' I said, wagging his hand. 'What was that?'

He giggled.

What the fuck was that?

The microwave beeped inside.

Arthur gave a little shout and pulled his hand out of mine to thwack my nose. He grinned. I grinned back.

'Come on then, buddy,' I said, and we went inside.

On the sofa, I plugged the milk bottle into Arthur's mouth with one hand and found the remote with the other. I stopped.

My thumb hovered over the red button. Something jarred. Some flickering half-memory. I couldn't place it at the time, but I would soon enough.

Arthur sucked happily on his bottle and I pressed the 'on' button.

Nothing.

BBC2.

Nothing.

ITV, Channel 4, Sky. Nothing.

This wasn't unusual; our Sky box sometimes crashed and just needed a reboot. Still, a little red warning light flashed in my mind and gave me an uncomfortable feeling in my gut.

Arthur gurgled in dismay as the teat slipped from his mouth. I let the bottle drop to the floor and he squealed as I put him back on the sofa behind me. I scabbled on the floor to the Sky box, took out the card and held the power button. Waited ten seconds, twenty seconds for the box to reboot. Arthur sounded a low warning note behind me, preparing for a full meltdown if I didn't return with his milk. The box finally came back to life and began its cosy introduction video. I grabbed the remote and sat back against the sofa, thumbing through the channels, trying each one in turn, moving through the international news stations: BBC World, CNN, Al Jazeera, the shopping channels, religious, music, adult ... all dead.

I told myself not to panic. All this meant was that Sky was out, maybe just in our area, maybe even just our dish. Still that half memory in the back of my mind, something I should remember ...

Arthur's warning note began to crescendo, so I lifted him down to the floor with me and reinserted his bottle. As he

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continued his disgruntled sucking, I took out my phone to see if I could get a connection on our Wi-Fi. Nothing. Broadband was out and I could never get a phone signal in the house anyway. I heard my son's last dry sucks as the bottle emptied.

'Come on, Artie,' I said, standing up. 'Let's take a stroll, mate.'

I slung Arthur in his backpack and hauled him onto my shoulders, stepped into my flip-flops and left through the back garden. We lived in Bonaly, a quiet scattering of small new-builds and gigantic mansions five miles south of Edinburgh at the foot of the Pentland Hills. Our house was a new-build, one of about twenty or so lined in terraces that faced each other across a small path. It was a nice area and they were nice enough houses, but cheap, so we didn't have a lot of space. *This is close living*, Beth's dad had grumbled when he first came to visit.

I walked down the main road trying to find a signal on my phone. It was a steep hill lined with huge houses set back behind long, gravel drives. Other roads fed off it: wide, tree-lined, well-paved cul-de-sacs with even grander properties spaced out along them. They had security gates, CCTV, triple garages, secluded gardens with ponds and trampolines. Some were styled with colonial wood, some like American bunkers. Beth was pregnant with Alice when we had first moved to Bonaly. We used to take walks around these roads, naming the most impressive one 'Ambition Drive'. We'd go arm-in-arm along it, seeing who could say the most offensive words the loudest as we passed by the gardens.

'Fanny batter.'

'Bub sucks.'

‘Cunt bubbles.’

‘Dick cheese.’

It was Ambition Drive I was walking along when I first truly started to feel that something was definitely wrong. I heard a motorised garage door open. It was still before six, usually too early for most people to be up. Then I heard a woman cry. It was a cry of fear. A child yelping, a man shouting. Then the door banging shut, then silence again.

I walked on slowly. I heard a glass break from an upstairs window. Loud, rattling footsteps on wooden stairs. Another bang, then silence again. A police siren whooped twice, far in the distance, possibly in Edinburgh itself.

There was something wrong with the silence, but I couldn’t put my finger on it. Even though it was early on a Sunday, it was not usually this quiet. Something was missing.

Birdsong.

The birds. The birds were missing.

I looked up and scanned the tall trees for signs of life. The branches were perfectly still and empty. The bushes, usually trembling with tits and starlings at this time of year, were deathly quiet.

I heard gravel scabbling and a dog’s yelps behind me. I turned to see a golden retriever sprawled on a drive. It was looking over its shoulder at what I presumed was its owner, a large, bare-footed man in a crumpled shirt and no trousers who was hurrying back to the house. I had met him once at a neighbour’s Hogmanay party when we first moved in. He had been guarded, predatory, scanning the room for opportunity. Some guests, mainly men (those in the larger houses, I imagined), he met with a single heavy tanned-palm slap to their shoulder and a loud boom of

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acceptance. When the circulation of the party threw the two of us into proximity, he met me with something halfway between revulsion and curiosity. I was not massively successful and therefore a strange thing, an alien. No shares, no property portfolio, no deals to close. What was there to talk about?

His wife had been stood in the corner, a small porcelain shadow of a woman sipping Bacardi in silence. They both had that strange, thick smell of wealth.

He caught my eye as he turned. He was snarling as he slammed the great oak door behind him. The dog whimpered and sat up, looking about in bewilderment. He saw me and gave a little wag of his tail, licking his chops. Arthur gave a gleeful hoot behind me. Why would he be putting a dog out at this time in the morning?

No room for a dog. Not any more.

That memory still flickered. That little red warning light in my cranium, that lurch in my belly.

At the bottom of the hill, I turned right onto the main road. There was no traffic, which wasn't unusual at that time of day. Suddenly a Range Rover tore out of nowhere and roared past me at sixty, maybe seventy miles an hour. I glanced four heads inside, a family. The father's fists were gripping the wheel and the mother had her head in her hands in the passenger seat. A discarded crisp packet was swept up in the tailwind as the car disappeared. It danced on the eddies for a few seconds before settling on the stone wall by the side of the road where it lay still, winking sunlight at me from its creases.

I couldn't find a signal. I followed the main road for a while and turned right, then right again onto the street back to our house.

It was after six o'clock by the time I reached the shop opposite our terrace. It was the only shop within a mile of the house. It should have been open at this time but the metal shutters were still down. I peered through the window to see if I could spot Jabbar, the owner, sorting through the morning papers, pushing the new milk to the back of the fridges so he could sell off the old stuff first. Jabbar was an overweight Pakistani who ran the shop with his brother. It was independent, not part of a chain, so it was filled with dusty cans and bottles already well past their sell-by dates and twice their RRP. Jabbar and his brother lived with their wives and kids in the house that joined onto the back. Close living.

There were no lights on, no sound. The door through to the house was shut.

'Jabbar,' I shouted through the shutter. 'Hey, Jabbar!'

I thought I saw some eyes dart at me through the glass panel of the door into the house, but when I looked again they were gone.

'Morning,' I heard somebody say behind me.

I turned around and saw Mark standing in shorts and sandals, carrying his daughter Mary in a backpack like Arthur's. She was about Arthur's age. Mark and I had met through the antenatal group that Beth had made me go to when she was pregnant with Alice. She'd made friends with three or four of the girls, her 'support network' as she liked to call them, who quickly huddled into regular Friday coffee mornings and unabashed texts about breast milk, cracked nipples and vaginal tearing. The husbands dutifully met on the fringes, nodding silently at each other at birthday parties, going for the occasional pint where we'd sit and discuss things like sport, work, news – trivial safe-houses, anything *but* the reason we

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were thrown together. Yes, there was the odd update on how the respective wives were doing, how the sons and daughters were growing every day, little bundles of joy that they were . . . but we were each aware that we didn't want, didn't *need*, that level of discussion in our lives. We were really just a bunch of strangers sharing a pub table.

I had been the only English one there. 'We won't hold that against you!' boomed Mark one night in the pub, slapping me on the back and repeating the joke I'd heard a thousand times since moving north. Mark and I got on OK, despite the fact that he was a road-cyclist and therefore a bastard, being much fitter and healthier than me. He had always threatened to take me out cycling. I always made excuses. I sucked in my stomach when I saw him.

'Mark,' I said. 'Hey. Hi, Mary.'

I turned back to the shop and peered through the window. Mark joined me.

'What's going on?' he said.

'You tell me,' I said. 'Jabba the Hutt's hiding in there.'

Mark banged a fist on the shutters.

'Jabba! Come out of there you fat bastard!'

Nothing from inside. We stepped back.

'Weird,' said Mark.

'Aha,' I said.

Mark nodded up at the hills at the top of the road.

'I just passed a load of squaddies from the barracks running up to the Pentlands.'

'Training?'

'Didn't look like it. They were all over the place, no leader. Some had two guns.'

'Have you noticed the birds?' I said.

'Aye. Weird. Any signal?'

'No, you?'

'Nada.'

'Our telly's out as well.'

'Ours too; must be a problem with the cable, I guess.'

'We're on Sky.'

We looked at each other. It was still quiet, still warm. There are times when I wished I'd savoured that feeling more.

'Any newspapers?' said Mark.

'No, the van always drops them here before six though. Jabba's usually sorting through them by now.'

We looked around the pavement. There was nothing there so we walked round to the back door of the house. There on the ground was a fat stack of *Sunday Times* newspapers bound up with string.

Mark tore the invoice sheet – someone had incredibly still thought to include it, even with what lay within – and pulled out the first in the pile. It was thin. Only two sheets thick, not the usual hundred leaf wad you get on a Sunday. There was nothing on the front apart from the *Sunday Times* logo and a single headline taking up the entire page.

Two blunt and terrifying words.

STRIKE IMMINENT

Then I remembered. I remembered everything.

I remembered the night before, pushing myself up from the sofa and knocking the dregs from the second empty bottle of Shiraz onto the carpet. I remembered scrubbing the stain with

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a cloth. I remembered the light in the room suddenly changing as a giant BBC logo filled the television screen. I remembered the silence in the studio, the flustered looks on the newsreaders' faces. I remembered that the female presenter had no make-up on, that the male had his sleeves rolled up as he leafed through the stacks of A4 sheets on his desk. I remembered that he stammered, sweated, blurted out words like 'data', 'miscalculation', 'trajectory', then 'indoors' and 'vigilant'. I remembered him putting his head in his hands, his co-host covering her mouth, then a loud thumping sound and the camera seeming to wobble, footsteps running away on the studio floor. Then the picture flickered and a high-pitched tone sounded like a test card. I remembered words appearing on the screen, white letters on primary red:

**STRIKE IMMINENT
STAY INDOORS**

I remembered blundering up the stairs, blinking, trying to stop my head from swimming, wine and bile rising in my throat. I remembered calling Beth's name. I remembered falling through Arthur's door, falling against his cot, Beth's face full of recrimination as she looked up from the chair where she was sitting feeding him. I remember struggling for words, slurring, trying to explain something even I didn't understand. I remembered her disappointed eyes and her face flat as she told me to get out of the room. I remembered protesting, trying to explain. I remembered her shaking her head, telling me that I was drunk and she didn't want me near him. I remembered staggering through to our room, waiting for Beth to come

through, trying to make sense of things, knowing that I should be doing something.

I remembered closing my eyes. I remembered waking up to Arthur's cries.

Strike imminent. A multiple asteroid strike on the United Kingdom is imminent.

Mark and I stared at the words for a few seconds before they made sense and I had processed my own dull memory of the night before.

“Strike?” said Mark. ‘Does that mean what I think it does?’

I didn't answer. Simultaneously we ran back round to the front of the shop. We started banging on the shutters.

‘Jabbar! Jabbar! Open up! Fucking open up!’

We kept hammering and shouting until we saw those eyes again behind the door. Jabbar hiding. We hammered louder.

Jabbar started waving us away. His eyes were set, determined, no longer the genial face of the local tradesman. We kept banging on the shutters and Arthur and Mary joined in the game with squeals and shouts behind us. Eventually the door behind the counter opened and Jabbar stormed up to the shutters.

‘Go away!’ he said, flicking his hand at us. He looked terrified. ‘Go on! Clear off! I'm not open!’

‘Look,’ I said. I held up the paper and pointed at the headline.

‘What's this? Are there any more papers?’

Jabbar stared at the words and then back at us. His fat cheeks were damp with sweat. Behind him I could see a woman looking at us, cowering in the doorway to the house.

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She was holding a crying baby. Behind her were Jabbar's two brothers. *Close living.*

One of the brothers was holding a portable radio close to his ear, his fist pressed against his lips.

Jabbar shook his head violently,

'No,' he said. 'Nothing.'

I looked back at his brother.

'Mark,' I said. 'Look.'

He was looking down at his feet, the radio still pressed to his ear and his hand across his eyes.

'Jabbar,' growled Mark. 'What do you know?'

I stabbed the paper.

'What does "imminent" mean, Jabbar?'

Jabbar faltered, shaking, his eyes flicking between us both.

'It's already happened,' he hissed. 'They're already here.'

I remembered the sudden gust of wind on the deck, the bending branches, the rumble. *What was that?*

An aftershock. How far away? Glasgow? London?

'Now go away! Get ...'

But Mark and I had turned from the shutters. Jabbar peered up through the slats as well. Far away, we heard a low, nasal drone. It was an ancient sound, like a rusted handle turned on something that had not been used in a long time. A sound that was not supposed to be heard any more, a sound that belonged in a different century. It began to rise slowly in pitch till it reached and held its hideous, gut-wrenching howl.

An air-raid siren. A fucking air-raid siren.

Jabbar sprang back from the shutters and fled back through the shop. Mark and I shared one last look and then bolted in opposite directions.

‘Beth!’ I cried as I ran, Arthur laughing in blissful ignorance as he shoogled in his backpack.

‘Get up! Get Alice up!’

I sped through the archway and onto the path. The siren was beginning its first awful dive back down. Where the hell did Bonaly have an air-raid siren? The barracks, I guessed. It echoed off the hills and howled through the empty streets; a demented, sickening sound that had only ever meant one thing and one thing only: Take cover, hell is coming, things are about to get VERY bad.

As I crossed the road, I heard the banished dog from down the road join in the howl. Some weeks later, I would suddenly remember this noise in the middle of the night and weep, actually weep, holding my hands to my face so I didn’t wake and upset Beth and the kids.

‘Beth!’ I screamed.

I saw people at windows now, woken by the siren. Tangled dressing gowns, puffy, confused faces frowning in the light. The sun that had seemed so warm and welcoming before was now vivid and terrible.

‘Get up! We’re ...’

The words actually caught in my throat. Ridiculous. I felt dizzy, the way you do when you’re a child about to call out for your parents in the night.

‘... going to be hit!’

My mind reeled. *Think. What do you do? What did those government broadcasts tell you to do? How do I arm myself? How do I survive?*

It occurred to me that I had subconsciously been preparing for this. Even in those last few strange and unfathomable days,

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a check-list had been forming in my mind, an old program from my youth kicking into life. In the 80s, nuclear war was absolutely, positively, 100 per cent how I was going to die. Not asteroids, and certainly none of this slow climate-change bollocks. The real deal. You were going to evaporate in an atomic blast: finished, done, end of. Then Aids came along and, if you were a teenager like me, your worries turned to the fact that death was now lurking within every pleated skirt and behind every cotton gusset. Now sex was going to kill you.

I could deal with AIDS. I knew I wasn't getting to have sex any time soon anyway, not with my face looking like an arse smeared with jam. But the nuclear threat was a different matter. That was real terror. And so began my first mini-obsession since my five-year-old self first heard that something called a Tyrannosaurus rex used to exist. I watched all the TV series, read all the books and kept all the survival pamphlets on how to make a home-made fallout shelter. I was fascinated and terrified. That bit in *When the Wind Blows* when the old couple walk out and think the smell of scorched human flesh is somebody cooking a Sunday roast gave me nightmares for a week.

Although I had long since stopped being hung up on the apocalypse, that part of my brain had started making a list as soon as the first reports of trouble came in. I think it always had done. Every major catastrophe, every natural disaster, every impending conflict gave me a little childish thrill. *This is it*, I would think with nothing short of glee. *This could be the one*. The Millennium Bug, 9/11, the London Bombings, Iraq, Afghanistan, the London Riots ...

There was no historical name for this one. This was just it. The End.

My apocalypse-obsessed teenager passed me up a list.
Water. Food. Medical Supplies. Light. Shelter. Protection.
Shelter. The cellar.

The houses on the terrace opposite ours had been built to a different design. They were wider and had five bedrooms rather than our two. The rooms were more spacious with higher ceilings and bigger windows; ours were just on the wrong side of poky and dark. There was a floored loft that you could stand up in. Some of the owners had built up into them to create a sixth room: the row of roofs now had dormer windows set into their tiles. Our loft was small and dark, enough for storage but nothing else. They were the posh houses. We were the cheap seats.

But what we did have – and what they didn't – was a cellar.

Our kitchen had a small walk-in pantry. For some strange reason – it probably appealed to her heightened nesting instinct – Beth thought that this was just about the best thing ever. It didn't have the same effect on me, of course, but in its floor was a hatch that led down some rough, pine steps into a space that was about the same size as the kitchen above it. It wasn't much, not very big. But it was underground.

'Uh-oh,' said Beth when the estate agent lifted the hatch. 'Man cave alert.'

Man caves. Sheds, garages, studies, attics, cellars. Places for 'men' – or at least their twenty-first century equivalents – to hide. To tinker, potter, be creative, build things, hammer bits of wood, listen to the music that their families hate.

Drink, smoke, look at pornography, masturbate.

The subtext of the man cave, of course, is that men don't want to spend any time with their families. For some reason this is perfectly acceptable; every man deserves his cave.

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It is my right as a tired parent.

I'm fairly sure these two small, windowless symbols of domesticity – airy female bliss for Beth; dark male seclusion for me – were the real reasons we bought the house. But in the end the pantry was where we stored all the food we didn't eat and the cellar was where we kept the hoover and the empty wine bottles. I rarely went down there.

I leapt up the steps to the deck and burst through the back door, nearly tearing Arthur off my back in the process.

'Beth!' I bellowed up the stairs. 'Get up! Get Alice up!'

Arthur bawled, the game no longer fun. I swung him off my shoulders and propped him up, still in his backpack against the kitchen sink.

Thumping feet down the stairs.

'Beth! Oh, thank fuck, you're up.'

I'd never been more proud of her. She stood in the kitchen door, wide-eyed, pale, with Alice in her arms, dressed and still groggy from sleep.

'What's happening?' she said.

I started opening and closing cupboards.

Shelter. Water. Food. Medicine.

'Daddy,' said Alice, rubbing her eyes. 'Arthur's crying, Daddy.'

'I know, sweetheart,' I said. I picked up one of the recycling boxes by the door and started dragging tins and packets from the shelves into it. We were low on supplies; Sunday was our big shop day.

A bottle of balsamic vinegar landed on a tin of tomato soup. I picked it up and stared at it. It seemed poignant somehow, this totem of middle class, now a useless dark liquor: no good

to drink, no nutritional value. I left it where it was and piled more things on top.

‘What does that siren mean?’ said Beth.

‘Daddeee, Arthur’s cryyyyiing.’

Rice, pasta, beans, tinned fruit, chocolate.

‘Ed,’ said Beth again. ‘Please, I’m scared.’

I slid the box towards the pantry and started filling another.

‘We need to get down in the cellar,’ I said. ‘Now. Get blankets, duvets, clothes for the kids.’

‘What? But what ...?’

I turned on her.

‘NOW, Beth!’

Arthur stopped crying. It was all quiet apart from the wail of the siren outside. Then a door banging, a man shouting, a woman crying, a loud screech of car’s tyres as it sped away.

‘How ... how long?’ Beth said. She was making calculations. The same ones she used to pack up the mountain of kids’ equipment into the car when we went away for the weekend.

I shook my head. *I don’t know.*

Beth carefully placed Alice down and ran upstairs.

I pulled out the bottom drawer and emptied the lot into the second box. Bits of string, crumpled photographs, bulldog clips, screwdrivers, dead batteries, candles, takeaway menus, spare keys, cigarettes, lighters; all the detritus of kitchen life fell into the box.

Alice was now twirling with her hands in the air and singing.

‘Look after your brother, sweetheart,’ I said.

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Alice sighed and slumped her shoulders, her ‘teenager’s sigh’ we called it, though she was only three. She trudged over to Arthur as if I’d asked her to do her homework.

‘Daddy, I want my milk,’ she grumbled.

I found a first-aid kit and threw it in the box along with some plasters. I could hear Beth thumping about above me, pulling things out of drawers and cupboards. Two large boxes of nappies thumped at the bottom of the stairs.

‘Daddeee ...’

How much time do we have? Hours? Minutes?

I guessed minutes.

‘Daddeeeeee ...’

Think. What next?

Water.

I once saw a film about a girl who survives an apocalyptic event. It was some unnamed worldwide cataclysm; we weren’t told the details. She lives on this farm in middle America and when it all starts happening the first thing her father does is turn on all the taps in the house. She says, ‘What’s happening Daddy?’ and he replies ‘I don’t know honey, I don’t know,’ and starts pelting round the rooms filling baths and sinks.

I shouted up the stairs.

‘Fill the bath, Beth!’

‘Znot basstime Daddeee!’ shouted Alice, twirling in the sunlight that was still streaming through the kitchen window.

There were more thumps from above. Beth screamed something unintelligible.

‘Keep the taps on!’

‘Silleeee Daddeeeeee woo woo woo!’

I had a sudden vision of our house destroyed. Brown air, heavy cloud, nothing but dust, brick and bent iron. Perched on top of the rubble is our bath. It's a dry, scorched husk. The taps are stretched, black liquorish strings melting over the sides like a Salvador Dalí painting.

Water.

You want to know how long it takes for the fabric of society to break down? I'll tell you. The same time it takes to kick a door down. I once read a book about Japanese veterans remembering the darkness of the Second World War. They seemed like old men with happy families at peace with the world, but they could still recall the hunger that drove them to kill and eat Chinese women. More often than not they would rape them first. Ask anyone who has been in a crowd that becomes too strong, where bodies begin to crush you. Is your first instinct to lift others up, or to trample them down? That beast inside you, the one you think is tethered tightly to the post, the one you've tamed with art, love, prayer, meditation: it's barely muzzled. The knot is weak. The post is brittle. All it takes is two words and a siren to cut it loose.

'Stay here with Mummy, darling,' I said.

'Daddy, where are you going?'

I ran back to Jabbar's shop. There were people gathered there banging on the shutters and shouting for him to open up. Others were gathered around the stack of papers.

I stopped short of the pavement and ran around the back. A few from the front saw me and started to follow.

'Jabbar!' I shouted through the letterbox in the back door. 'All I need is some batteries and water! You've got more than enough in there!'

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‘Go! Away!’ shouted Jabbar from inside.

There was another sudden great gust of wind. The tall trees down the hill creaked painfully as their branches crumpled. Then the short, deep rumble again. Everyone stopped. Then screams and renewed hammering on the shutters of the shop. Three cars sped past and down the hill. *Where the hell are they going?*

I was aware of people joining me at the door.

‘Jabbar!’ I shouted one last time. Hearing nothing, I stepped back.

Took a breath.

Kicked the door.

A shock of pain in my ankle made me howl. The door had not shifted. I tried again closer to the lock. This time the wood split and I heard footsteps running from inside. On the third kick, the door swung in and I followed it into Jabbar’s hall, pushing his brother into a stack of boxes in the corner.

I couldn’t remember the last time I had pushed or punched anyone. Primary school, maybe?

‘Get the fuck out of here!’ shouted Jabbar as I rounded the corner onto a corridor with a red, floral carpet and cheaply framed pictures. The place was hot, dark and stank of old curry and babies. Jabbar’s wife was hiding in a doorway behind Jabbar, who was still sweating profusely.

‘I just want batteries and water, Jabbar,’ I said, storming up the corridor to the door into the shop. ‘Not all of them, just enough for me and my family.’

‘No!’ said Jabbar, stepping out and squashing me against the wall with his shoulder. ‘Get out of my house! Get out!’

His bulbous, wet stomach pressed into my chest as he tried to wrestle me back through the door. His breath was full of

hot panic, his eyes wild. Jabbar's brother had picked himself up behind me and was trying to hold back the growing throng at the broken door.

Jabbar's hand was on my face now. I could taste the salt of his rough skin in my mouth. With a surge of effort, I managed to swing back my leg and kicked it hard against his knee. He cried out and fell like lead on the stained carpet, clutching his leg.

'Bastard!' he cried. 'Bastard! Get out! Get out!'

I ran past him and into the shop, grabbing packs of batteries from the shelves and picking up three crates of Highland Spring from a stack on the floor.

Jabbar was still curled up on the floor in the corridor and his brother was now being pushed back by the crowd of people. Our next-door neighbour Calum was the first through. He stared straight past me and elbowed me out of the way and into the shop. Behind him were an old couple I didn't recognise. They walked past me too, the woman flashing me a nervous smile as if we were passing in the street.

Jabbar's brother was on the floor now. Two of the crowd were kicking him and pushing him into one of the rooms. With the batteries balanced on the crates, I marched back down the corridor.

'Bloody bastard!' screamed Jabbar again as I stepped over his fat head. 'You bloody bastard!'

His wife was crouching next to him, holding his head and weeping.

At the end of the corridor I avoided eye contact with any member of what was now a mob. Most ignored me too, but as I got to the door, a man I recognised from one of the houses opposite ours fixed me with a sharp stare.

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‘Hey,’ he said, blocking my path.

He was in his early sixties, perhaps. His daughter had recently given birth and we used to see the whole family quite often having barbecues in the back garden. Beth and I would wave and talk about inviting them over for a play date with Arthur. Frank. I think his name was Frank.

He nodded at the water.

‘I need that.’

‘There’s more in the shop,’ I said. I moved towards him, but he grabbed me by the shoulders and pushed me back. He made a lunge for the water but I threw my weight into him and crushed him against the door frame. He made a sound I hadn’t heard before. It started with a ‘*Hubb-ubb-ubb...*’ as the air was pushed out of his lungs, but as I squeezed past him it turned into a comical childish squeal, his face crumpled as I pushed by. Perhaps, out of context, it would have sounded amusing. But this was a man I saw almost every day. I had never shaken his hand. The first and last time I ever had human contact with him, I squeezed his lungs until he made a sound like a child who had been denied chocolate.

Frank fell to the ground and held his chest. I crossed the road, trying to keep the stack of batteries balanced on the water and avoiding two more cars screaming down the hill going fuck knows where.

I had almost reached the path to our house when I saw Mike standing at the corner. Mike was an old widower who lived in a one-bed flat around the corner. He was seventy-three, bald with a white beard and a cheap blue jacket. He smiled and raised a hand.

‘Hullo, Edgar,’ he said.

‘Mike,’ I said. ‘You need to get inside.’

He leaned forward on his walking stick and peered over my shoulder at the chaos breaking out at the shop.

‘Can’t you hear the siren, Mike? It’s happening, you need to get inside.’

Mike puffed through his nose and flickered a half-smile as if I had just told him a joke he didn’t quite get or approve of. He shook his head.

‘You take good care now, Edgar,’ he said. ‘Look after your family.’

Then he took a long, quivering breath and turned his face up to the blue sky.

That long breath, the squeal, the dog’s howl, the air-raid siren. These are the sounds that stayed with me, which will always stay with me.

The crates were slipping in my hands. I heard a shout.

‘Hey!’

I looked behind. Frank had scabbled to his knees and was standing in the middle of the road, staring straight at me.

‘You!’ he said. ‘Cellars! You’ve got cellars!’

Shit.

A few of the other dressing gowns who were clamouring to get into Jabbar’s house had turned as well. They were all now looking at me. Frank started to stride across the road. He was almost halfway across when another 4x4 came hurtling down the hill, hitting him square in the side and tossing him up like a rag doll. His broken body somersaulted over a hedge and landed against a dustbin while the car sped on. A few seconds later I heard a crunch of metal, and a chorus of car alarms joined the howls of the siren and the dog that still filled the air.

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The others who were following Frank across the road stepped back momentarily. Then they continued across the road, glancing between me, each other and the road uphill.

I bolted up the path and into our garden and hurled the crates of water across the deck and through the kitchen door. I slammed the bolt down on our gate and sprinted up to the kitchen, scooping the batteries from the deck. As I closed the door I saw the others arrive at the gate. They were shaking it and screaming. More had joined them on the path and they were now trying all the gates along our terrace, streaming into the gardens and pummelling the back doors.

I locked ours.

Beth was standing at the open cellar door. She had thrown down the boxes and whatever else she had found and was now standing on the steps holding Arthur with her free arm stretched out to Alice. Alice was standing at the door of the pantry with her hands tucked under her chin, shaking her head.

‘Come on, darling,’ Beth whispered. ‘Come down with Mummy.’

‘Nooooo,’ said Alice.

Alice didn’t like the cellar.

Beth was trying to smile.

‘Come on,’ she said. ‘It’s an adventure.’

‘Noooooo Mummeeeee.’

I heard our bamboo fence start to break and turned to see two of the mob scrambling over it. One had caught his pyjamas on the top and they were torn from his legs as he fell face first into our raspberry bush. He shrieked as the thorns tore into his

face, then into his bare legs and groin as he struggled to get to his feet. The woman behind landed on his head and made towards our door.

‘Alice!’ I shouted. ‘Get down in the cellar, *NOW!*’

Alice began a low moan.

‘*Ed!*’ shouted Beth. ‘Don’t, you’re upsetting her! Come on, darling, Daddy didn’t mean it.’

‘There’s no time! There’s no fucking time! Get down there *NOW!*’

Alice’s moan rose up like the air-raid siren. The air was now a nightmare of wails and howls of different pitches and intensities. The woman’s face was at the door, wild with terror and rage. Others had broken through our gate and were following up behind her. I ran to the cellar door and threw the crates of water down past Beth. I found our Maglite, grabbed it from one of the shelves and pushed it down the back of my shorts. Then I started pushing Alice towards the cellar hatch. She squealed and tried to wriggle away.

‘Alice, you need ...’

‘NooooOOOO DADDEEEEE!!’

Bodies were now pressed against our kitchen door, hammering and kicking the glass from top to bottom.

No choice.

‘Alice,’ I said. ‘I’m sorry, darling.’

Beth instinctively ran down the steps with Arthur.

I picked Alice up and dropped her down into the pit. She hit the stone floor with a thud and the air left her tiny lungs with a *hub*.

Silent, winded, she tried carefully to get to her feet, but slipped and fell on her face. As Beth helped her up and brushed

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her down, Alice whimpered in shock at the betrayal I had just dealt her.

I closed my eyes so I couldn't see the faces at our kitchen window. Then I followed Alice down and went to pull down the hatch.

'I want my bunnies,' she said quietly.

Fuck. The fucking, fucking bunnies.

'Tell me you got her bunnies,' I said to Beth.

'Oh, no, oh, shit,' said Beth. 'Oh, bollocks, they're upstairs in her bed.'

Alice's bunnies went everywhere with her. In bed, in the car, on the sofa, at the table, at nursery. Everywhere. When she had a fall or when she was tired or when she was scared, they were her only source of comfort.

When she was scared. I looked down into the gloom of the cellar.

How long...?

'My bunnies,' Alice said again, deadpan, no emotion, hand held out, all business.

I weighed up the options. An unknown time spent in the cellar. An unknown time before fuck-knows-what happened to Edinburgh. Faces at the window trying to get in, trying to get to us. One of the square panes of glass in the door broke and a fist came through it.

Suddenly, the air-raid siren stopped. The air around us seemed to lurch in the silence as if we'd all just hurled ourselves over a cliff edge. We were free-falling now, free-falling into whatever came next.

I leapt up the steps and through the kitchen, up the stairs and into Alice's room. My heart thumped in my throat. Everything

was eerily quiet after the noise. The dog had stopped. Alice had stopped. Even the mob outside had stopped in momentary confusion.

The bunnies were on Alice's pillow. I grabbed them and turned but stopped as I left for the door. Out of the window, on a branch in our tree, was a single small bird. It was a blue tit perhaps, chirping merrily away and flicking its head about like small birds do. Behind it, far away against the blue sky, I saw something else. A small dark shape that shouldn't be there. Not a plane but something like it. A tiny speck moving quickly, a dark trail behind it. Then more behind that.

I bolted down the stairs and threw Alice's bunnies down to her. She pulled them to her face and began furiously sucking her thumb, rubbing their soft ears against her cheek. I fell down the steps. As I did, I risked one last look at the door. The mob had renewed their attack on it. The first woman had her face and palms squashed against the glass. Fifteen or twenty others surrounded her, their pummelling fists sometimes connecting with the back of her skull.

By her side was a little girl not much older than Alice. She was wearing a nightie and holding onto the woman's leg – her mother, I supposed. She looked at me through one of the lower panes of glass, strange and calm amidst the rage and panic above her. A trickle of urine ran down her mother's thigh and over the girl's hand.

Silence again, the noise sucked from the air. A blinding white light blossomed in the sky behind the faces at the window.

I slammed the hatch shut.