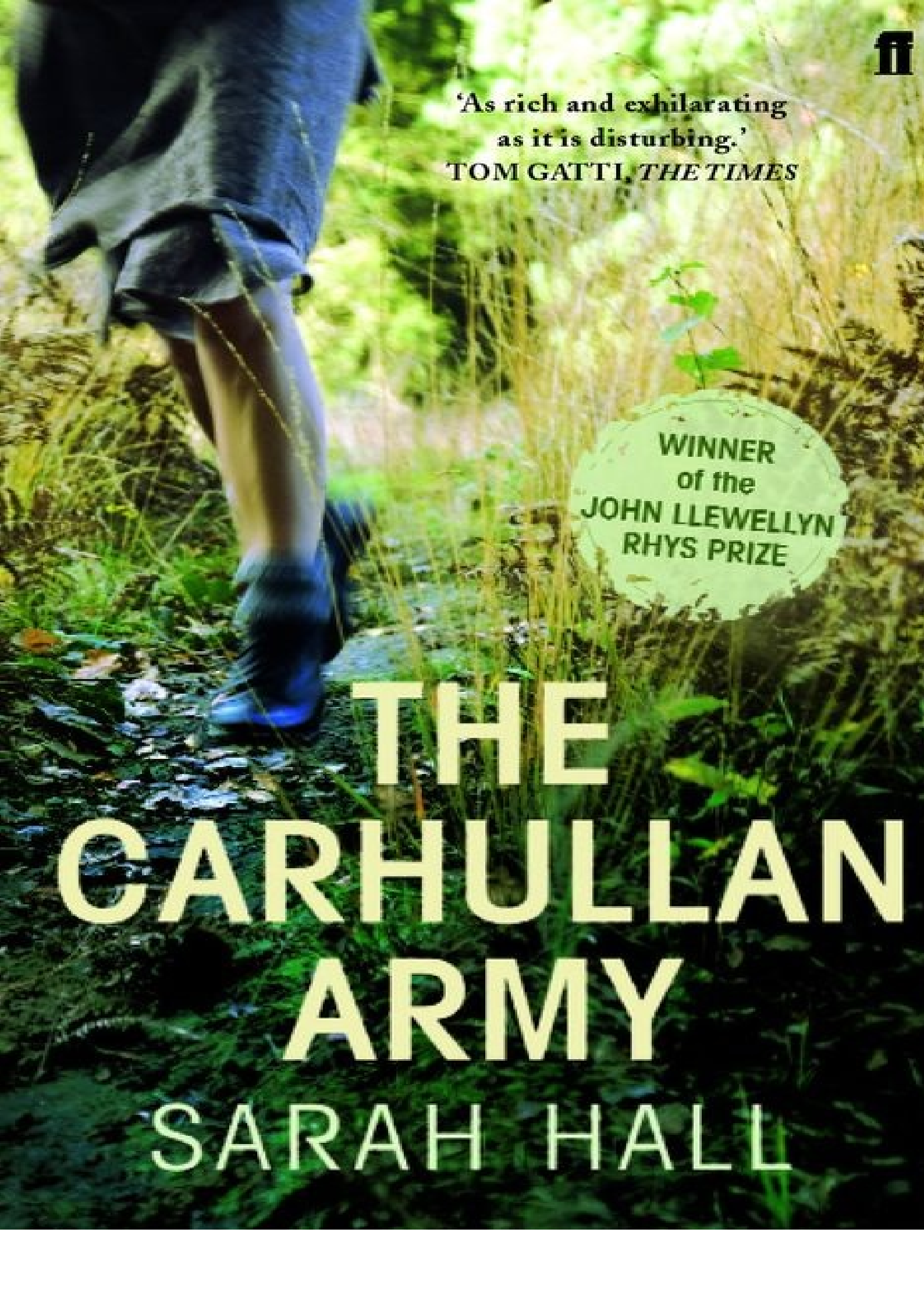


'As rich and exhilarating
as it is disturbing.'
TOM GATTI, *THE TIMES*

WINNER
of the
JOHN LLEWELLYN
RHYS PRIZE



THE CARHULLAN ARMY

SARAH HALL

The Carhullan Army

SARAH HALL



For Jane and Mae

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English Authority Penal System archive - record no.498: Transcript recovered from site of Lancaster holding dock

Statement of female prisoner detained under Section 4(b) of the Insurgency Prevention (Unrestricted Powers) Act

FILE ONE
COMPLETE RECOVERY

My name is Sister.

This is the name that was given to me three years ago. It is what the others called me. It is what I call myself. Before that, my name was unimportant. I can't remember it being used. I will not answer to it now, or hear myself say it out loud. I will not sign to acknowledge it. It is gone. You will call me Sister.

I was the last woman to go looking for Carhullan.

It was a wet rotting October when I left. In the town the leaves had begun to drop and their yellow pulp lay on the ground. The last belts of thunderstorms and downpours were passing through the Northern region. Summer was on its way out. The atmosphere felt as if it was finally breaking apart and at night and in the mornings something cooler had set in. It was a relief not to wake up sweating under the sheet in our room in the terrace quarters, coming out of some hot nightmare with millimetre dampness on my chest. I have always slept better in the winter. It feels like my pulse runs slower then.

This freshness seemed to cleanse the town too. The bacterial smell of the refinery and fuel plant began to disperse at night when the clouds thinned and the heat lifted. Each year after the Civic Reorganisation summer's humidity had lasted longer, pushing the colder seasons into a small section of the calendar, surrounding us constantly with the smog of rape and tar-sand burning off, and all of us packed tightly together like fish in a smoking shed.

The change of temperature brought with it a feeling of excitement, an alertness that went beyond nerves or the heightened awareness of the risks I knew I was taking. It was restorative. The cold reminded me of my childhood. Back then the weather had been more distinct, separated. Some old people in the factory where I worked said of all the English traditions to have been compromised, that the weather was the saddest. As if there had been a choice of some kind, a referendum for these semi-tropics.

I still recall the fresh ticking of hail on my face in March as I stood to catch the bus for school. And autumn blusters, when objects large and small were bellowed back and forth. The deep-vein chill of January; my hands and feet numb under fleece and wool. You don't fear possibility when you are young. You don't believe the world can really be broken or that anything terrible will happen during your lifetime.

Even the rain is different now; erratic, violent, not the constant grey drizzle of old postcards, jokes and television reports. It's rain that feels wounded. There is seldom any snow on the fells, though people in the town look for it out of habit.

Where I was going the altitude was high, it was remote, and part of me hoped that if I stayed there long enough I would see those white drifts again.

I left at dawn, so I could get out of Rith without being noticed. My rucksack was packed light enough to carry a long distance, then on, up into the mountains. I was not bringing much away with me – clothes, boots, some tins of food and squares of rusk, a canister of water, a medical kit in case the regulator could be taken out of me, though I didn't know if that would be possible. And I had an old Second World War rifle, packed between the jumpers and waterproofs; its stunted barrel nuzzled against the top flap. This was what I planned to bargain with at Carhullan.

I had hidden the bag in an alleyway behind our building the previous night so I could get down the stairs without the extra weight, without bumping and scraping the walls on my descent. It was pushed

into an alcove behind the main chamber of the rain tank where it was dark and dry. I'd put it there while the families in the other quarters were eating dinner, and before my husband got back from his shift, checking the void first with a stick to make sure there were no rats' nests.

In the early morning I left our bed without waking Andrew and dressed quietly in the communal bathroom. I'd stowed a plastic bag in the pocket of my trousers to collect the items I needed. There was a new packet of soap on the shelf belonging to the family in the next room, and I took that too, slipping it into the bag with my toothpaste, deodorant, a razor and some blades. I paused for a moment before opening the little medicine cabinet they used. There was some aspirin, a packet of sanitiser towels, and a sachet of powder for treating cystitis that was long out of date. I gathered them up. Then I made my way along the hall and down the stairs.

Outside the door of the building I waited a minute or two to be sure that Andrew had not heard me leaving, trying to be calm. My heart was sending fast volleys of blood up through my chest. I could feel the contact and back-turn of pulse in my fingertips. I told myself it would be OK. In the last month I had trained myself to wake early and had practised this departure. Always I'd made it out silently and safely, then I'd walked around the dark town, careful to avoid the patches where the ferocious dogs roamed, before coming home again. But this was not a dry run. I breathed deeply, blew the air out, and waited. The last thing I wanted was to have Andrew following me down, calling me crazy, creating a fuss and waking the people above. He would never have let me go off with a packed bag, out of the official zones, even though we were at odds now, hateful or silent towards each other.

I was tied to this building. He knew it, and I knew it. There were no other options for us. And if he'd discovered me, he would have pulled me back upstairs, or held me down in the road as I struggled, until a monitor from the Authority arrived, perhaps making an excuse for my behaviour, saying I was high, or had had a nightmare. He would have told me to wait it out, saying no matter how bad things were now, we could get through it, and then we could part company when everything was less fraught, less dangerous.

I leant on the terrace wall and listened for his footsteps this last time. The only sound I could hear from above was the waspish hum of the energy meter on standby. I looked up. The sky was the dull colour of bitumen, like the shale turning in the vats at the refinery where Andrew worked. There was a white smear of moon, a ridged and filmy ulcer in the lining of cloud. There were no lights on yet, not Rith, and none would come on until the morning power allotment at six, when people would have time to heat water and food, and could watch the early news for bulletins from one of the fronts and the lottery numbers. By then I was planning to be long gone.

After a few minutes I went to the alley and collected my bag. I knew I had to move quickly now, without over-thinking. Usually the town was dead at this hour, but it was possible to run into a Authority cruiser. The thought of it made me sick. I wouldn't stand a chance of explaining myself to them. And I didn't want to contemplate what I was doing, and falter in it, though I was sure now that I would not. Not after the last few weeks. I walked through the town, away from the combined residences, past the old shopping centre with its boarded windows, and the turbine warehouse where the metal hulls were stacked up waiting for dispatch, as they had been for years. The streets were deserted and everything was quiet. Only the glaze of the old red masonry, the slates, and the tarmac reflected any light, showing a version of the settlement that seemed ghostly and unmodern.

It was hard to imagine all the people behind the bricks, sleeping two and three to a room, or lying awake, talking softly so as not to disturb the other families. Some of them crying, being comforted and ignored. Some not caring who heard them through the walls, pushing away from a sore body as the hits of cheap ephedrine began to wear off. Each time I had ventured out in preparation, these dawn hours seemed to have an atmosphere of reduction, as if there had been a cull, not a condensing of the people.

On the end of each row of terraces were the silhouettes of meters, small buzzing cysts that had

been designed to read the flow of energy from photovoltaic tiles. Now, they were being used to regulate consumption from the old domestic power grid. There had been few improvements made after Reorganisation. The ten-year recovery plan was becoming a hopeless myth. It was hard not to look behind me, back the way I had come, to see if there was anyone there, following, or just watching me go. I made myself not turn round. I told myself the best way for me to keep going was to give my eyes one simple option – forward.

There was a soft crackle in the sky and the drag of thunder to the west. I knew it would rain sometime soon, that I'd have to stop and put on my waterproofs. But I could not afford to pause while I was still inside the perimeter. Maybe later, when I was clear of the place and warm from the walk, I would strip down. I knew that I would dry more quickly than my clothing.

For years I had not been out of Rith. No civilian had, unless they were being transported to a detention centre. The zones did not allow for transference. The original register bound people to the areas at the time of the collapse. Only government agents and the Authority had any need to travel, and the means to do it, and then it was usually by train.

It was my hometown and I was familiar with the surroundings – the steep streets and welter of roofs, the Beacon Hill, and opposite, on a twin tor, the castle. I kept on, along the old motorway flyover. Beneath it were heaps of scrap and rubbish, and I could hear rustling animal sounds. Past the settlement border, in the lower areas, the roads had deteriorated. They were much worse than I had imagined. In their years of redundancy they had sagged and rucked. Whole sections had been pulled away by the floods. They felt loose underfoot, like scree. In places there were small craters full of rainwater; I stumbled into them, soaking my trousers up over my boots to the knee. I realised it was true what people said at the factory and in quarter meetings. Nothing was being repaired except the arterial routes used by the Authority.

To begin with I jogged where I could, concentrating hard so as not to trip or turn an ankle, and pacing myself for what would be a long hard day. After half an hour I reached the rise where the white tollhouse stood. Its windows were out and the roof had given at one of the gables. I remembered from a local history lesson that it had been burnt down twice by the Scots, then rebuilt. Now it was almost in ruin again. The owners must have long since moved into Rith, with all the other outer-lying residents.

Down the hill, a little further on, the old Yanwath traffic bridge was still intact. I had driven over many times before the travel ban. The signal that had once controlled it was dead; the glass light black with dirt and its post askew in its concrete bed. Where the road dipped down before rising to the bridge's abutment, water pooled and eddied. There was debris afloat in it, mostly indistinguishable perhaps lumps of render from the houses upstream. I forded it, walked to the middle of the span and peered over the parapet. Below, the river Eden was brown and swollen and slipping past with frightening speed. In the half-dark I saw the bright movement of its edges, the backwash of white caps and whirlpools. It had broken its banks in the rains, spilling into the ditches and gardens on either side. I could hear the lower branches creaking as the trees along its sides were stripped of leaves.

The cottages next to the bridge were window-deep in the current. There was a strong odour of wet mortar, fabric and silt. It was the familiar smell of flooded homes; the riverbed slurring up house walls, rotting curtains and carpets. It was the smell I had woken to over a decade ago, when I had come downstairs to find my house full of litter and sewage.

I knew the road on the other side of the bridge led away through a small empty village, into the green abandoned wilds of what used to be national parkland – the place my father's generation had called the Lake District.

By the time the vehicle appeared it was midday, and raining hard. At first I thought the noise was just water, moving heavily in the air or through underground channels beneath the road. Then I heard a shift of gears. I jumped up onto the verge and turned round, half-expecting to see the dark blue shape of a cruiser and ready to duck behind the wall. A white civilian van was coming towards me, making its way slowly along the derelict road. Its suspension looked loose and amplified, as if the body had been raised from the chassis somehow, and it rocked slackly over the ridges and potholes. The windows were filthy with dirt, seedpods, and leaves that had been shaken from the trees in the late afternoon. Behind it was a waft of greasy brown exhaust. It passed me by, then slowed, and finally stopped. Nervous, I walked up to the driver's door; the window squeaked down.

'Where are you off to then, lass?' The man had a red face like a daub of glass taken out of a furnace. His pale eyes ran over me. I was a mess. My hair was dripping, and the old white tank top I had on was sopping and clinging to my skin. I shrugged my shoulders forward and lifted my arms over my chest to cover up. He laughed. His teeth were rotten along their edges. Each tooth had a dull yellow plateau at its tip and around his gum line was a telltale seam of silver. 'Well, a spot of hiking looks like. Last of the Wainwrights, are you? Or maybe you want to be the first one up onto the top again. Plant a flag. Things must be improving in town if that's the case. Come on. Best you get in.'

I hesitated. I hadn't wanted to get involved with anyone on the way, and I knew questions might mean trouble, but my shoulders and feet were aching and I did not pause for long. I walked around the back of the van to the passenger side, pulling the wet material off my chest and wringing it out. He leant over and opened the door for me, like my father always used to when he drove me to school. He'd put a dirty-looking rag on the seat to keep it dry. I lay my rucksack on the floor of the cabin and climbed in. 'Good girl,' he said. 'Good timing this, isn't it?'

He put the van into gear and pulled away. It felt strange.

I had not been in a car for years. I'd handed my keys and personal information in along with everyone else, and I'd forgotten what it was like to be in control of a vehicle, to be enclosed but free to go anywhere. Watching him dip the clutch and flick on the wiper blades felt like a dream or a long memory. The smell in the cabin was strong, tart, like old clothes, vinegar mixed with urine, or maybe it was the unwashed smell of the man himself. But I didn't complain or make a move to wind the passenger window down. I was glad just to be out of the rain.

The soles of my feet were already tender, though I had on two thick pairs of socks. I felt the prick of pins and needles start up in the ends of them and I curled and flexed my toes. I had not expected a ride from anyone. I'd been practising walking for months when I wasn't on my shift, aimlessly at first, as if to pass the time, and then with purpose, looping round Rith's periphery, up the hill to the Beacon and back down again. There was no crime in that, just walking, though Andrew thought it stupid to risk the dogs that scavenged around town, rooting for food in the tips. They were filthy and distempered, he said, and I was asking to get bitten. Occasionally there were attacks, but none of them fatal. I had not been able to wear my bag on any of these occasions; it would have been too suspicious and it was a shock to my body, the weight of it.

I'd made sure to eat well all week; two portions of rice instead of one, sardines for breakfast, even though it took the box of provisions low, and Andrew would suffer for it for the rest of the month. I was as fit and as fed as I could be. But turning circuits round the citadel in the dim morning and eating extra cans of fish was one thing; hauling out to the abandoned park with my possessions on my back was altogether another. I'd come about twelve miles and I was sore. The bag on my back had been pulling down hard and my spine felt compressed. Showers had been coming and going for hours, the hems of my clothes were damp and chafing. Every step took me further away from the town and on towards my own limits. The appearance of any vehicle was unlikely, almost miraculous, and I was thankful for it.

The van pitched and swayed around bends in the road, the man taking corners wide to avoid obstacles, holes, and bales of undergrowth that had burst out of the verge. I put my palms on the seat either side of my legs to brace myself and stayed quiet. I didn't want to make conversation or have to navigate an interview that could perhaps be reported back. Every once in a while the man looked over at me and sniffed. I could tell he wanted to talk more than listen anyway. He had the air of someone cabin-fevered, cut-off. He must have a work-station out of the zone, I thought.

'So. Have they lifted the restrictions, then?' he finally asked. 'You're the first one I've seen in a long time. God, I don't know how long. Quite a buzz it was, seeing you on the road up ahead. I thought the bloody hock had got me seeing things.' He pointed to a small silver bottle in one of the moulded wells on the dashboard, and offered me a swig. I shook my head and put my feet on top of the rucksack to keep it from rolling about as the van ploughed through the shallows of a stream. The chassis grated on the stony bottom, scraping hard, so it sounded as if we were shovelling up pebbles. The man stamped on the clutch, shifted to a low gear and revved the engine high.

There seemed to be new becks everywhere, spilling out of the walls and fields. When the tyres finally gained traction again he eased off. He repeated the question. 'They've been lifted for me, yes,' I said, trying not to sound anxious or furtive. I looked over at him, thinking that, for all his talk of hiking, he had probably guessed something was wrong anyway; me alone on the road, having ranged so far out into the town, and with no apparent way back. I waited for him to challenge me.

He pointed to my rucksack. 'Have you got a tent in there? Cause you'll not be getting back for a long bit. I'm going to Rosgill and then on to Blackrigg. You'll be all right if you've still got people out here. I'd probably know them, I know everyone that's stayed. Only a handful left, if that. Most have probably been struck off, daft buggers, but not me – I work up the reservoir, at the draw-off tower. There's not much to do, just sit about and work the sluice. I've got a permit and a priority quota for the van; it's all official, like. I'm doing my bit for the recovery. No one else is much in and out these days, just me, when I pick up my supplies, or come for an engineer, and I won't be off again for a good three weeks, maybe more. You were lucky I was passing when I was.'

I was lucky. I knew that. If I rode with him to Rosgill he would save me fifteen blistered miles. He rattled off a short list of local people who had been stubborn enough to stay, as if I might volunteer some relation, and then began to complain about the ever-tightening allocation of fuel and the lack of fresh rations in his blue box. 'UHT milk, I bloody hate it,' he said. 'Tastes like cock-wash, doesn't it? Excuse my manners. It's what we get for shafting the farmers, though, all that centralisation nonsense. When we need them, they've all been put out of business.' I let him talk, trying to keep my head clear and my mind focused.

The original plan had been to leave Rith as early as possible and walk the whole way. If I kept a good pace and didn't rest too long I thought I could be close by dusk. I'd looked at an old OS map that Andrew kept in one of the boxes under the bed, and it seemed feasible in a day, or at most a day and a half, though the last bit looked steep, tightly hatched with contours as it was. It was going to hurt getting there. But it would be worth it. When I got to the farm everything would be better. The woman would see to that.

In all the weeks of planning, I hadn't contemplated the possibility that they would be gone. Or worse, that they would turn me away. I hadn't given those ideas any room for development, fearing they would throw me off course. The only thing left for me was to hope. It was hope that nourished me day after day, in a way the imported canned food never would. The reality was that I could not be sure of the reception I'd get at Carhullan, what I would find there and who. But I was unwilling to believe the place would now be empty, that they'd have given up. I knew if I'd let those thoughts stay with me, I never would have set off.

No genuine rural reports had been broadcast for at least five years. It wasn't in the interest of the

Authority to issue them. Their circulars never made mention of the other half of the landscape, the other half of Britain. Occasionally some diehard would turn up on Rith's outskirts, a rider on a pony, a customised bike, or on foot, but they only came to see what developments were being made, to stare at the New Fuel factories, the Uncon oil refinery, or to make a plea for antibiotics. Sometimes they exchanged things on the black market. Now and then they would come to report a death, a burial. But it was of little concern to those in charge. Anyone who had not participated in the census was now off record. Anyone living beyond the designated sectors was considered autonomous, alien. They were discounted. They had chosen not to help with the recovery, and they were no longer part of the recognised nation. The Authority simply called them Unofficials.

'Don't get me wrong, I couldn't stand all the tourists,' the man was saying, 'but it's been dead out here. There's no community and we used to be good at that. There's no life. There's nothing but rabbits and bloody deer. I'm not a man that does well without people.' He looked over at me again. He leant forward and unlaced the fastening of my bag, and carefully took a jumper from inside. I pulled it on over my wet vest, wishing I could strip off first. 'Oh, you should have said if you were cold. The heater works.' He opened the dashboard vent and I felt a rush of musty warmth against my face and my shins.

The man went on. 'Not that I'd want to be in town. I can't stand the town, especially now, when it's like a bloody ghetto. All the rules. And the vermin. It's a joke. Who'd have thought we'd end up like a bloody third-world country. I'm glad I got the post here. I've got some space and some clean air. I'm my own boss.' I nodded and he quickly looked over again. 'Listen, don't do anything daft when you get out there,' he said, 'otherwise I'll feel responsible for dropping you off. You better give me your section number, just in case. Write it down or something.' I nodded, but said nothing, and looked out of the window.

His conversation ran on to fill my quiet. 'Aye. It's nice to have a visitor back. Things must definitely be looking up. It's been so bloody desolate out here, especially now there's no pub. And I can't stand the news. It's all lies. They think we can't take it. They think we don't know what a mess everything is. Don't get me wrong. I'm behind our soldiers a hundred per cent, and the King – he's got balls to be out there – but come on, what is the point?' He sighed. 'You know, you forget what it's like to talk normally with folk. You forget a lot of things.'

The air inside the cab was quickly hot and stifling. I felt a trickle of sweat or rainwater run down the ridge of my back. I could smell the gamey damp underneath the man's arms as he lifted his elbow and leaned forward on the steering wheel. He opened his window a crack. 'You never said where you wanted to be dropped, did you? Look, tell you what, if you like you can wait a while with me before heading up the fell, have a bit of food, and rest up. I've just picked up some dried pork.' He put on a sarcastic American accent and said, 'It's from our Christian friends in the Yoonited States.' Then he laughed, snidely, shaking his head. I felt his gaze on my legs, moving over the wet contours of my thighs. 'Hey, listen, do you mind my asking, are they still, you know, sorting the women out, so we don't get overrun?' He laughed again, his face glowing. 'That's the one good thing about all this, I reckon, a return to the era of free love. Mmm, yes.' His fingers flexed on the steering wheel.

A flare of adrenalin went off inside me. I felt it scorch against my breastbone and light my nerve endings. Suddenly I wanted to be out from under everything, I wanted to be as unsnapped and reckless as this journey I was undertaking warranted. I had made it this far. I'd made it out and away, without hesitation or incident. I would not be taken into the back of a cruiser and humiliated again. Behind me was a husband I could no longer bear to speak to, a factory of useless water rotors where I hated punching in, and the monitor who had me lower my overalls in front of his colleague, who had come forward with a gloved hand, joking about dog leashes, and though the wire of my coil was easily seen he had still examined it.

There were no regulations out here. There was no human mess, no chaos, poorly managed, and barely liveable. There was just me, in my own skin, with my blood speeding up. I was taking a chance on something that felt not like a gamble now but like my only option.

‘I’m not going walking,’ I said to the man. ‘I’m going up to a place called Carhullan.’

He made an airy sound with his nose and jerked his head back, as if blowing a fly out of his nostril. ‘Carhullan?’ he repeated, breaking the word into two pieces as if it was too difficult to manage all in one. ‘Is this a joke? You having me on?’ he asked. ‘No,’ I said ‘That’s where I’m going.’ He blew air down his nose again. ‘Oh my God. You’re serious. That bloody place! You stupid, stupid girl. What the hell are you thinking of ...?’

He left off, scowling now, his mouth slack. I knew he had heard of it, more than heard of it; he had an opinion about the farm’s residents. And I had said the name with little doubt that I knew its history as well also. I glanced over at him. His face had flamed redder. His eyes were shuttling about in their pin sockets, left to right.

‘Well. I don’t know. Whatever you’re doing, or think you are, you’ve got the wrong idea. I don’t know. You better just be careful of that lot, eh. I don’t know. They’re worse than ever they were, I’ve seen them, marching about. I don’t know what they think they’re on with. Or why anyone would bother with them. A nice woman like you. They never should have been allowed to stay up there, like a gang of bloody terrorists. It’s sick if you ask me.’

I looked straight ahead, lowered my voice. ‘I didn’t ask you,’ I said.

I felt another flash across my chest, but it was exhilaration this time, not anger. They were still there then. They were still at Carhullan. They had held on after all, through everything. How many would there be now, I wondered. Fifty? More? And what kind of conditions would they be living in? I wanted to ask all this of the man sitting next to me. I wanted him to say something else about them, bad, insulting, prejudiced though it may be, just to give me another positive confirmation that the place was up and running. I wanted to know what else he could tell me, even if he told it in anger and disgust. What I wanted to know most of all was whether she was still there. Jackie Nixon. I wanted to know whether she was still involved. Whether she was still in charge. But it was too late now. I knew it would be impossible to find these things out from the man. The conversation was over. After the exchange we wouldn’t speak about it again, or about anything else.

The van sped up and he fought with the steering wheel to take a sharp corner. He was bright with indignation and disapproval and I heard him curse softly under his breath. When the bend was rounded he shut off the heating vent, no longer keen to make me comfortable. Like the smell in the van, the atmosphere had turned sour. We had gone to war, it seemed, over one simple word. I had declared my proclivities, as he had his. I was no longer good company for him, no longer a person he might share his food supply with or try to fuck. All these months he had no doubt been hoping to see a return of the residents to his lovely wilding valley, a sign that civilisation was being reinstated, with its old arrangements, its traditional preferences, and what he’d got instead was a deviant, a deserter.

He didn’t try to talk me out of it. I think he must have realised that I was serious. There was no reason he had seen only one person travelling on this road in the years since the collapse. I knew the more he would have said, given the chance, that he was composing arguments in his head, readying insults. There were other choice words, no doubt, perched on his tongue, sitting behind his stubby decaying teeth, and I had heard them all before. Cult. Faction. Coven. I thought maybe he would spill his vitriol; reiterate all the worst rumours about Carhullan from the time before, when there was a media to be curious and to condemn the place. The babies, the mutilation, other terrible practices. Or I thought maybe he would slam on the brakes and make me get out.

But the old van ground on, over trellises of disrepaired concrete, and through the autumn sluice, held my nerve, waiting for whatever would happen next.

With no one to cut them the hedges had grown tall and wide. Branches reached down over the road scratching the paintwork as the van crept underneath. There were brambles everywhere, but the fruit looked black and tiny, as if it had ripened too soon and too small and then shrivelled away. Rhododendron was slowly taking over the lower fields. And there was a plant I didn't recognise, a thick green creeper that had wound its way up the telephone poles and round the trunks of trees.

We passed through a hamlet and I saw a dozen or so cars, left to rust in gateways and cottage garths, abandoned on the roadside. Some were covered with flapping tarpaulin, or belted down under plastic sheets, their previous owners hopeful maybe that at some point they could be recovered, converted to bios, or that there would be some kind of compensation paid out. In Rith there were yards of parked vehicles where the supermarkets had once been, their keys locked away, their number plates recorded in the Authority's logs. Here people had been far less trusting, it seemed, unwilling to give up their former property, unwilling to be disqualified.

I looked at the manufacturers' badges as we passed by, imagining people choosing them in showrooms and dealerships. The loans that had been taken out to finance them. The observances of airbags and seatbelts, stereo systems. It all seemed so ridiculous now. In the gardens of the empty houses, grass had grown up around their wheels and under their hubcaps. Mildew smeared the windscreens, and their wing-mirrors hung at broken angles. Rain had eaten at the bright paint. Inside their engines had no doubt rusted and clogged, mice and birds had probably nested among the metal frets and shafts.

It had all come about so quickly and ruthlessly, the shortages and price hikes, and soon afterwards the ban. Nothing on a large enough scale could have saved them, and now nobody believed it would. They were useless, husks of a privileged era. The New Fuel industries and Uncon combined could barely supply the power grid, let alone wide-scale transport. Ordinary people would continue to be deprived. I realised then what the strong smell in the van was. It was one of the petrol colloids burning in the exhaust.

I got out when the man next slowed down, not even waiting for him to come to a proper stop. I opened the passenger door and leapt down, landing messily with my rucksack in a rut of gravel. He braked savagely and a few feet on the van skidded to a halt. 'You stupid bitch!' he shouted after me. 'If you think it'll be any better up there, you're dead wrong. You've got no bloody idea, have you girl? Give it a week and you'll have your tuss back down here and you'll be begging me to take you home. I guarantee it.'

I was already walking away. He reached over, slammed the door and drove off, my security details forgotten. His voice had contained an alarm that bordered on hysteria. I could almost believe he was afraid for me. For a moment I felt sorry for him. He had picked up a woman off the road and helped her, only to have her say she was signing up to a life where he was nothing, no more use than one of those redundant cars. I hadn't flirted. I hadn't been interested in him, had not even made a pretence of it for the sake of the ride. There was nothing he could take away from the meeting, to keep in his head and use later. Or maybe just a picture of a rained-on body would be enough.

I shivered. The air was cool and damp outside. But I was glad to be out of the van. Suddenly I saw an image of the man bent over me, his broad white thighs rocking, his hands holding down my arms, smothering my mouth, blind with what he craved and unstoppable. I was not frail, but I would not have been strong enough to stop such a thing. I knew that. I hadn't properly calculated the risks of accepting the lift. He had probably been alone at the reservoir for years, getting more and more frustrated, his faculties congealing with loneliness, his fluids thickening up.

But as quickly as the image of our struggle arrived another one took its place. In it I was standing over the man, heeling him in his face until it split and came apart like a marrow. And it was clearer to me, this second image; it was the stronger of two possibilities, if only in my mind. I knew that I had

done the right thing by leaving Andrew, leaving the harsh orchestration of the town, the dismal salvaged thing that the administered country had become.

The van disappeared behind the tangle of waxy green bushes lining the road. I heard it stall, and its ignition turn over phlegmatically, like the congested coughing of the town's sick dogs. It caught, revved dirtily, and grumbled away out of earshot.

I hadn't asked the driver how to get to Carhullan. But I had not needed direction. Vaughnsteele was written on the signpost opposite. Up ahead the road split and a church stood to one side. I memorised the map before I left, got the directions locked in my head. I'd need to bear right through the settlement, and at the last building take to the rocky howse, then go about four miles, moving gradually upwards on the fells, until there was a split in the track. I'd keep to the right past a proper one called Moora Hill and go on up, another three miles, imagining the High Street summit, following the old dry-stone walls until they finally ran me in through Carhullan's gateway.

I'd left the map in Andrew's box under the bed. I wouldn't need to use it again. I wasn't planning on going back.

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For a minute or two I stood in the village. It was deserted as I'd expected it would be. The slate cottages were dark. They looked cold and hollow now, like cattle bothies. They seemed nothing more than the elements of which they had been built. I knew this village reasonably well. When I was very young it had been popular with walkers and tourists, and my father had brought me here to hike. There had been a working school and several farms that had survived the troubles at the turn of the century. People from the South had once bought retirement homes here, under the blue shadow of the fells.

After the fuel crisis it had been left to its own devices, and slowly it must have emptied like all the others, before the orders were finally given to evacuate. On the wall of one cottage someone had written the words *Rule Britannia* in red and white paint. They had tried to draw the Cross of St George, but it looked distorted, bent out of shape. I couldn't tell if it was an act of vandalism or one last loyal statement from the proprietor before leaving.

It was eerie. There was no drift of chimney smoke, no voices outside the pub, no washing snapping dry on lines strung across the gardens. The strange ivy creeper ran up gables and onto roofs. Television aerials were strangled by it. No signals or electrical impulses had passed through them for years. These were non-priority venues. The plots of land next to the houses had run amok. Gooseberry bushes, vegetable patches, rhubarb and vetch had grown wild, furling over lawns and tangling up gateways and arbours. Anybody coming back to their old rural lives would have to slash their way through foliage that had grown huge and confident, swallowing the habitations back into the earth.

The rain had cleared for a spell and all around me water was trickling off walls and around stone, finding wider channels to join. The sun was out and a harsh wet light made me squint. It lit up the long blades of grass on the verge, and turned the grey roofs flinty.

My stomach grumbled. In an effort to gain distance I had not stopped for breakfast, just eating a protein bar on the move. I looked at my watch. I'd wound it carefully before I left. It was half past twelve.

Andrew would have woken and found me gone. He would not have found a note; I hadn't left him one. Nothing I could say would explain. I no longer felt it was my duty to. And I didn't want to apologise, or confess to my plan and be traced. I hadn't really imagined that one missing person would be worth a search party, but my concern was that I would somehow lead the Authority to Carhullan, that I'd cause trouble for them even before arriving, before I'd had a chance to prove myself in any other way. If anyone cared enough they could find me through the driver of the van. But more likely

would simply be written off as another missing person.

~~I sat on a low concrete stand and took out a tin of fish, the tin opener, and a square of rusk from my rucksack. I was almost thirty miles out, too far to have turned back that day, even if I had wanted to. Now that I wasn't moving, everything I had walked away from seemed to be stalking me. I'd left behind a husband, and a life that guaranteed basic survival, even if there were penalties, sacrifices. I had wilfully turned away from society, to become nothing and no one. It should have scared me, but it did not.~~

At first Andrew would assume that my number had been called up for half a day's extra work; he would assume I had signed the early rota for extra credits. Or he might think that I was just walking, roaming about town, as was my habit recently, collecting blueberries from the Beacon Hill, or mushrooms, and looking for a sign of something down below in the town, anything that did not seem spoiled and wrong.

For all our differences, he knew me. He knew that I was restless, that something was scratching painfully in me and I couldn't make do with the way things were. I was no longer one of a pair, holding on to the other to get through this awful time among the squalor and overcrowding. It had become obvious I did not enjoy sex with him and I had long ago stopped instigating anything at night or letting him touch me. He'd kept asking me why I couldn't, what was the matter, and why I was so inflexible that I couldn't knuckle down to help make things better, put up with the inconvenience. Perhaps he'd thought I was depressed, like so many others, and that I wasn't trying hard enough to find the spirit we were all being asked to conjure, like a replica of that war-time stoicism of which the previous century had proudly boasted. The truth was that he had accepted the way of things, and I couldn't. I'd despised the place I lived in, the work that brought no gain. And I had begun to despise Andrew.

It hadn't always been that way between us. We had been like-minded once, two feisty students, full of the sense that things could be better, that the worst could be prevented. We had been at college together in the Solway City. I remember seeing him in the Union bar, strong-featured, attractive in thought. Both our flats had been flooded when the new estuary defences failed, and we were caught up in the first of the big insurance scandals, put in temporary housing, close to each other. It had seemed a symmetry enough to bring us together. My father had died shortly after and Andrew had helped me arrange the funeral. It had been a relief to have him take my hand and console me. We talked of going to Scotland, making a life there, but in the end we moved back to Rith. I had loved him then, and I'd leant on him in the years that followed.

As the rolling conflicts began abroad, and the recession bit at home, I'd taken comfort in venting my half-formed opinions to him, and hearing them echoed fully by his own. We seemed united by our disappointment, our anger, and our distrust of the reinvented Forward Party, who had taken office under the banner of reform, and had then signed the Coalition Oil Treaty. The failure of international policy was so clear. The war was geopolitical. It was not ours to fight. We had the technology to disengage from our allies abroad, but not the will to invest.

We had protested. We'd travelled to London and rallied at Parliament; the crowds were so large people were crushed and the gathering was broken up with tear gas. The troops continued to be dispatched. Every day along the pipelines soldiers were blown apart. More were sent. Andrew said it would probably go on for years, and if he were called up to serve he would refuse. If we had known what was coming we would have left the country then. Though I don't know where we would have gone.

As I ate fish out of the can in the abandoned village, I remembered us sitting on the Beacon Hill. The dark red of Andrew's hair had caught the final rays of sunlight. His head had blazed as he talked and his eyes were alight with frustration. It was the night the prime minister had made his final

address and stepped down. Within a year of taking office the Forward Party had split, and from the ashes of its new image old doctrines had risen. But something was different, I knew, something was terribly wrong. There was a feeling of unsettlement around the town, as if the world was turning quicker on its axis, as if it was slightly out of control. Andrew's brow was furrowed. He looked like a man twice his age. 'They've signed us up for dependency and bankruptcy,' he said, tossing a stone hard into the air and watching it fall towards the bushes on the slopes. 'And now Powell's got control of the party there's no way out. The man is dangerous. He's one of the old guard. He's power hungry and he's a bigot.'

Back then he had seemed unafraid, undaunted by the gravity of approaching disaster, even when the market crashed, businesses began to go bust, and jobs were lost, even as the country began to stagger towards collapse. I would listen to him seethe about all that was going on, and his fury was almost tactile, almost mine. I was young. I looked to him for reason, for a voice. He bristled at each new measure the government put in place, blamed them for everything: the widening of the conflict abroad, the new fronts in China and Venezuela, the ruthlessness of the banks, blackouts, deportation, empty supermarkets, and hospital closures. He resented the extreme measures put in place to administer the crisis. The ten-year recovery plan was just a contrivance to keep people in check, he said, and decoy their attention. Most of all he hated the creation of the military police force. It was un-British. The Authority was an affront to the rights of the public.

When the general elections were suspended, all hell broke loose. He told me to stay home, and I went out on the street with a group of local men. He threw rocks at council windows, surged up towards the civic offices in the castle, and took a riot stick in his lower back. The monitors fired live rounds into the crowd. Five people were killed. It was the same in the other towns and cities. Nobody stood a chance.

Andrew came home and peeled off his shirt so I could see the lesion. I remember putting my fingers gently on the soft red welt. There were bubbles of blood trapped under the skin. It looked as if some creature from the sea had stung him. For the first time his eyes were despairing. 'I think this is it,' he said. 'There's no going back from this.' I could hardly believe it. The awful truth was upon us. Things were breaking down, completely, irreparably; all the freedoms we had known were being revoked, and nothing could be done to stop it.

That night we were full of angry passion, and reckless. Andrew winced through the sex, asking me to make him hard again and again with my hands and my mouth. We didn't use the issue of contraceptives, though we knew what would happen if I conceived. Maybe it was the only protest left for us. The next morning we decided to get married, to secure ourselves as best we could. We were a good unit. We could care for each other. The laws were changing quickly. Our rights were slipping away and there was no telling where it would end.

We made our quarter in the old terraced house in Rith as comfortable as possible. There was nothing to decorate with and no furnishing to buy. But I hung the pictures I had kept since college and I put the quilt my mother had bought for her own wedding on the bed. We were given work papers and placements, he at the refinery, me at New Fuel. We made the best of it.

When I received notification of my appointment at the hospital, Andrew was kind, as sympathetic as he could be, saying it was completely unfair and that he was sure it would only be temporary. It was cancelled twice, citing ill health. The third letter came with a red stamp on the envelope. It was delivered by a monitor. I recognised him. We had been at the same school. His name was Tye and he had been captain of the football team. He was dressed in the dark blue collarless uniform of the Authority. He held the document out to me and said nothing.

Six weeks later I walked to the hospital in Rith and went in to be fitted. In reception I was fingerprinted and handed a thick cotton gown. I waited in a room with twelve other women of varying

age. The youngest was about sixteen. She looked terrified, and every few seconds she sniffed and rubbed her nose. I wondered if she had even had sex yet. Nobody spoke. A nurse came in and quickly explained what would happen to us. She held up a model of the device. It was made of copper and was about the size of a matchstick. Two threads ran from it. She pointed to these and said they were longer than those of the original coils, so that the vaginal checks we would undergo to see whether they were still in place could be made more easily, and not necessarily at the clinic. I didn't understand the what she meant. It was only later I found out the Authority was making random examinations; the women were sometimes asked to display themselves to the monitors in the backs of cruisers.

The nurse clenched her fist around the coil to signify a womb, and she smiled at us. We could expect heavier periods after insertion, she said, and perhaps a fraction more pain. But really it was nothing to worry about. She left the room. A few moments later my name was called. A couple of the other women looked at me as I stood up, as if my face would set the tone for each of their own experiences. The procedure took ten minutes. It was a male doctor that came into the surgery, fingering into his gloves, and I asked if I could have a woman doctor instead but he said there was no one else available. I lay back on the creased paper sheet, wishing I had taken a painkiller that morning as those I knew who had already been fitted had recommended.

Afterwards I came back to the quarter, nauseous and cramping. The sensation of pressure at the neck of my cervix remained for the whole afternoon. I tried not to dwell on it but I felt awful. My nails kept digging into my palms and I had to shake my hands every few minutes to relax them.

Andrew was rostered at work until the evening, so I sat in the yard in the muggy sun. There was a strong UV warning but I didn't care. All I could think about was the doctor who had rubbed some lubricant inside me, inserting the speculum and attaching the device as efficiently as a farmer clipping the ear of one of his herd.

I looked at the plastic pots in which I had tried to grow courgettes and beans the summer before. They hadn't sprouted, and in places the soil looked interfered with, as if it had been dug out by an animal. I had seen rats from the upper windows, scurrying the length of the wall. By the end of the afternoon the yard was full of shadows. I wished again we had signed up for an allotment, or had been placed in a house with a proper garden, but the waiting list was now so long and there were so few of them available to civilians that it seemed hopeless.

When Andrew arrived back he asked me if I was OK and if he could see it. We went inside, through the door to our section of the building and I took down my trousers. I sat on the bed and he gently opened my legs. Everything felt inflamed. I had cleaned myself up with a towel after the procedure but the water would not be hot enough to wash properly until later that night. There was still some translucent medical jelly there. It glistened and felt almost unbearably slippery as Andrew ran his thumb over me. 'How does it feel?' he asked me again. 'Is it uncomfortable?' He was kneeling in front of me. I shrugged, shook my head and looked away. 'You're still you,' he said. 'Beautiful you. They can't control that, can they?' His thumb was rubbing me gently. I wanted to ask him to stop, but it had been too traumatic, and there was still some blood, but neither one of us had ever said no to the other.

I felt him slip his middle finger inside me. He meant to do it slowly and carefully but the lubricant made his movement easy, and I heard him murmur a noise of surprise and arousal. My eyes were closed. 'Is that nice?' he asked me. There was the small wet sound of him drawing out and pushing his fingers in again.

His breathing changed, became thicker. 'God. I'm sorry, I just want to be inside you,' he said. 'Can I? Will it make you forget it maybe? Come on. It'll be just us.' He leant forward to kiss me and unzipped his jeans. 'Here, you,' he said. He took my hand and put it to his groin. He was hard and as he gripped him I felt the blood straining underneath his tightened skin. He moved forward a little on his

knees.

~~At the clinic we had been advised by the nurse to wait twenty-four hours. But after the hands of the~~ doctor and the sharp bite of the tubing, any prohibition now seemed pointless. 'Oh, God, yeah,' I whispered as I pushed him inside, 'it's so wet.' I could see in his face, the degree by which he felt the sensation more than usual. His mouth was open and his eyes seemed unfocused, with a pleading look

As if still afraid it would be painful for me he didn't move much, but there was a deep rawness to all. He came quickly, and with more intensity than he ever had. As he pulled out I felt the warm fluid escaping onto my thighs. He held on to me, breathing hard, then his body jerked as if he was coming again. He put his thumb to me and began to rub, but I told him not to.

When the power came on he ran a bath for me and told the family in the room next door I would need a bit longer than usual. 'Tough day,' I heard him telling them. 'She's been at the clinic.' For the rest of the night he was attentive, treating me with kindness, and he seemed happier than he had in months. It wasn't to last.

The conditions were hard on all of us. Life changed in every way and it was difficult to adjust. There was despondency and resentment, food shortages, humiliations. Any small feeling of bliss, and a cheap narcotic substance available to mask the difficulty, to make people forget what they once had, was easily sold. In the poorest quarters people took low-grade drugs, ketamine, and hits of silverflour which rotted their jaws. They passed syphilis among themselves and the clinics cut tumours from the genitals of those who abused the animal tranquillisers for too long. There was almost no money, and what little there was seemed meaningless. People traded with their bodies, their possessions, they signed up for futurised loans.

This was not England, everyone said. This was some nightmarish version that we would wake from soon. The overdose and suicide rates climbed. Each time another occurred in Rith, and was talked about at the factories and plants, Andrew and I walked up the Beacon and held hands. It wouldn't be us, we said. We were stronger. We'd come through OK.

But over the years I saw Andrew become weary and practical, reduced to the base mechanism of getting by. Or perhaps he simply lost faith and the energy to resist, realising how close we had come to something far worse than the critical existence left to us. As time went by he became less outspoken. He no longer seemed lit by anger when talking about the recovery's directives. Perhaps the government had done the only thing it could have to keep the country from breaking apart, he said, and I began to wonder what that early version of him had really consisted of. Meetings of opposition in the packed terraced houses concerned rather than excited him. The speakers were frauds and fantasists, he said, with no sense of financial solution, only contrary ideas and gripes. He didn't want to get sick being around all those germs. He began not to attend. Instead he visited the bar near the castle, where the off-duty monitors drank.

He went to work, slept soundly through the night and reached for me in the mornings. Sex was one of the few remaining pleasures, he said; it was nice to feel me without any barriers. He ate the cubes of meat and fruit, from the shipments of tins sent from America, without complaint. After a while he began not to take small ritualistic pleasure in burning their labels in the old cast-iron fireplace of our quarter, as we had once done together. When he was promoted to overseer at the refinery he seemed grateful, and told me it was madness to be anything other than complicit in Britain's attempts to rebuild herself. Once stability returned, so too would the freedoms we had lost. 'We can be bitter,' he said, 'or we can just get on with it.'

When he'd said this I'd bitten my lip, and then turned to face him. Out of a deep place in me I felt my fury rise. 'She's a female, is she, this country that's been fucked over?' The cup I had been holding left my hand and I heard it explode with brittle force against the wall. He ducked, his eyes clenched shut, as the fragments showered him. Before he could recover from the shock, or answer,

had left the room, slamming the door behind me.

~~For months we bickered and sulked. Our conversations began to fail on even the smallest of levels. Who had not written *tea* on the monthly provisions list. Who had eaten the last vitamin tablet, the last omega supplement. Who didn't understand the importance of this principle, or that political necessity. I knew he saw me as stubborn and naive, too upset to become empowered again. In bed he tried to negotiate, and have us agree physically, as if this would be the way we could still function together, and if I could separate my mind from my body and he could continue to communicate with one if not the other. 'We could ask for anti-depressants,' he said. 'There are some coming over from America now and I could maybe swing something at work to pay for it.'~~

But he must have known at heart that I was not depressed. He must have known it was more than a simple chemical response to the ongoing situation. Mine was a different kind of sickness. I didn't feel listless or oppressed. I didn't want drugs or numbness to mask my consciousness. I knew that everything around me was wrong. I could see it. I could sense it. And I had not yet found a voice with which to make my arguments. It still lay somewhere inside me, unexpressed, growing angrier.

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I scraped the last flakes of tuna out of the tin with my fingernail and finished the rusk biscuit. It was a dry meal and I had swallowed half the water from my canteen. It was all right to take so much fluid on board, I thought, even though I still had a long way to go; I would just refill the container from the stream when I was higher in the hills. This was always what I'd done when I'd hiked with my father and I had loved the cold mineral rush against my lips. It had been years since I'd walked in the district but I could remember the taste, fresh, with the faint brine of limestone and moss.

I unpicked the label from the tin and looked at it for a moment. The brand was Blessed Friends. The American and British flags flew in opposite directions from the same flagpole and there was a small prayer printed next to the ingredients. *Lord, keep us from the forces of evil, bless our sacred liberty, and let those in darkness find your light. God save the King.* I tore the paper into small pieces and let the wind take them from my open palm. There were a couple more tins in my rucksack, some sardines, and peaches in syrup. I hated these metal cargos the country depended on. Everything about them was either too sweet or too salty. After the tins in my backpack were finished I would never have to eat anything imported and reconstituted again. I would not be fed anything else that stuck in my throat.

Maybe when he woke, Andrew would guess the truth – that all the silences, all the tensions, had been leading to something like this. That it went past upset over the new rule of law, the housing conditions, the uterine regulator that had been inserted. He would remember all the arguments, just as I was thinking of them now, hearing the echo of our raised voices.

'Why the hell would you want to bring a baby into all this mess anyway, even if your number came up for it?' he would ask me, each time I scowled at the hair-thin line of wires resting between my legs and said I wished I could just pull it out and be rid of it. 'I mean where's the problem, really? You're still a young woman. This won't go on forever.' 'You just don't get it, do you?' I would tell him. 'It's not you, is it? It's never you.' 'Never me what?' he'd ask. 'Never men, you mean? Look, you know it's just a practical thing! There's no conspiracy here. Can't you focus on what really matters? You could slope around town when you could be volunteering for overtime and getting us a few more perks. Fucking hell, this country is in bits and you're obsessing over your maternal rights! Where are your priorities?'

I would try to explain my side, the legitimacy of my grievances, and I would fail. I felt that if I could just have some space to think clearly I would be able to find the right words, and convince him

bring him back some way from the direction he was heading. But he could not comprehend such pet complaints in the face of greater issues. And I knew in a way that he was right. There were desperate priorities. Everything was at stake. At times I began to doubt my own mind.

Every day I'd woken and told myself to concentrate on being optimistic. But I'd felt like an animal wanting to lash out, wanting to scratch and maul. Sometimes Andrew would catch me looking his way and then he'd ask why I hated him so much. I had no reply. In the end, past the practical exchange of timetables and supplies, we had not talked. I made no more confidences, said nothing provocative. He did not try to touch me. And we lived in a state of unhappy peace. After I was spot-checked in the cruiser, once they had finally let me go, I walked to the top of the Beacon Hill and sat through the night in the tower, holding my knees and listening to the bark and howl of the feral packs below. When I arrived home in the morning I said nothing. Andrew stood up from the chair in which he had been sitting waiting, pushed past me, and went to the refinery.

Maybe today, I thought, some kind of intuition would tell him that our end of the building was even quieter and darker than usual, as if a genuine departure had occurred. He'd ask the family in the other quarter if they'd seen me, and they would say no. At some point he'd open my drawer in the shared bureau and it would be empty, wood-smelling, and dusty in the corners. Then he'd realise what I had done. Maybe he'd think I had gone to another house in the section. I had never talked to him about the others. Even if he had gone through my storage boxes at some stage before I'd left, and seen the old photographs and cuttings of Carhullan, he still would not associate what he saw with me leaving. He would have thought it too much of a leap for me to make.

He would wait a day or two, in case I came home, saying nothing to anyone, and if the factory sent word to ask why I wasn't punching in he'd say I was sick. Some old loyalty would extend that far. But then he'd have some difficult choices to make, about when to report me gone, when to move someone else into the terrace quarter with him, and when to have my name taken off the civil register, so that I would become ineligible for work, accommodation, and children. So that I would be an Unofficial.

I stood up from the concrete stand and looked around the village. As I moved something cat-sized flashed away into the ditch next to the cottages – a fox, or a badger, I wasn't sure which. I suddenly realised the hedgerows and trees were full of birds. They were not singing but every few moments one would flutter out of the greenery and flutter back in again. They were yellow-eyed, red-beaked. I did not recognise them. In the road ahead were two suitcases lying open on the ground. I walked over. They were empty except for the debris of leaves and dirt that had blown inside. It was unnerving to see the cases. I tried to imagine the last person leaving the village, and what kind of scene there had been here. Perhaps it was hurried, with Authority monitors standing alongside. Perhaps they had been too busy; they were taking too much, trying to salvage too much of their old life. There might have been a fuss, a dispute, and their personal items had been abandoned or scavenged through. It was not unheard of for monitors to confiscate the best of what they found in the possession of civilians, to be sold later on the black market.

Up ahead the church doors had been removed, probably to burn, and a grey arched hole tunneled back into the building. I didn't go inside. There was no point. All the pews and the pewter would be long gone, stripped out, split apart, and recycled by utilitarian locals or by the Authority. Not that I could have carried anything so large and bulky with me up to the women. But it didn't matter. I had not come empty handed.

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The rifle had belonged to my father. I'd known its whereabouts for twenty years, since he had buried it in the garden of his house on the north side of Rith. He'd never had a proper licence; all he wanted

for was to take pot shots at crows when they went after his seeds. I could remember him lining up the sights and squeezing the trigger, the crack of the shots being fired knocked his shoulder back an inch as if he'd been punched there. He had let me hold it, supporting it under the stock to lighten the weight. Once or twice I had fired it, and each time it felt as if my heart had been jolted loose. 'You make a good soldier, little tinker,' he'd said to me. 'Hup two three. Atten-shun.'

I was nine years old when the weapons amnesty was issued. I remember there had been a bizarre shooting in a school in Manchester. A mother had come into a classroom where her boy was in the middle of a maths lesson. She waved to him and then aimed the gun. Eight other children and the teacher lay dead before she placed the barrel under her own chin. Nobody knew why she had done it until it was watched on television as they carried the bodies out of the schoolroom in black bags. Within a year all guns were banned again.

The evening news had said there were an estimated twenty thousand weapons that would have to be handed in from British citizens. 'That's twenty thousand minus one,' my father retorted, winking at me from his armchair. It was against tradition, he said, and he wasn't taking part in any soft-police hand-in. 'Will they arrest you and put you in prison?' I'd asked him. He'd laughed and said not a chance.

He wrapped the rifle in oily rags, put it and ten boxes of cartridges into a steel container and shovelled them into the earth next to his leeks. 'Never know when it might come in handy, tink,' he said to me as I watched him dig. He rested for a moment on the handle of his shovel and gazed at me. 'It does n't do to rely on those in charge completely. That's one thing the Yanks always got right. You've done a bit of history in school, haven't you? Well, now. Imagine if the National Guard had surrendered their arms, and the Germans had invaded after all. We'd have been fighting with broom handles and axes like hairy medievals while they ran over us with tanks. Your great-granddad knew that. This was his gun. He was at Osterley.' Then he had smiled and scuffed my hair. 'Come on, help me get this clod tipped in.'

I remember my father fondly. He was a good man, and his eccentric defiance stuck in my mind. My mother had not lived long enough to see me aiming at the black corbies on the garden wall. I was glad my father's bad lungs had let him escape before the next war, a decade later, that he had not witnessed the decline of his proud country. I knew it would have taken a piece out of his spine. It had taken the oldest most severely. Their parents might have lived through downturns and wars, but they had only known stability, appliances, and readily available goods. For them it was simply madness to have to give up their homes, to be supplied with canned food instead of fresh global produce, and to be told that Britain was now little more than a dependent colony.

My father's generation seemed to die out quickly, though their lives had been lived in prosperity. The health system cracked apart. Epidemics swept through the quarters in every town and city. There were new viruses too aggressive to treat. Those who did not fall ill seemed just to fade away. It was as if, one by one, they made the decision that the present and the future were intolerable propositions. And maybe they were right.

I never forgot my father's gun. Remembering it reminded me of him, wearing his slippers and dressing gown out in the garden, bending to pull snails off his tomato plants, watching film after film on his satellite television with a cigarette drooping between his fingers. It reminded me of another era, a better time. I wondered if the rifle would be found when the house reverted to the council and was reallocated, but whenever I walked past it the garden was overrun with weeds and untended. Finally it was shut up, abandoned like all the others falling outside Rith's habitable zone, and it became a midden.

I'd known Andrew would not be home until much later. There were shipments of kerogen coming in from the Southern ports all that week and he was overseeing their handling. I had finished my shift

at the factory and I walked over the hill beside Rith to the house where I had lived as a child. The stars were beginning to spark and glint but there were few lights glimmering below, as if life in the town had been blown out. Only the Authority barracks in the castle glowed faintly, running on auxiliary generators. The grid would not go on until six, leaving people to manage as best they could with candles and the glow of Mag-lamps until then.

The garden of the old house had looked overgrown and dilapidated when I arrived. It was filled with rubbish. By the gate there were heaps of electrical appliances, chairs, and bundles of rain-swollen papers, cast-offs from homes that had been thinned down or vacated. Beside one of these piles was a rotting dog. The muzzle was sodden and decaying and its jaws looked set in a wide snarl. The eyes and fur were gone. Its belly had distended and under its tail was a writhing patch of maggots. I stood over the creature until the smell that rose from it became unbearable. Then I walked away.

The wooden potting shed at the other end of the garden was coming apart through the planking, the walls leaning inwards like an unstable structure of playing cards. It was unlocked. Heaps of cans and plastic bottles had been flung inside. I kicked them to one side and found a trowel. I brought it out and began to cut through the undergrowth at the edge of what had been our vegetable patch, pulling up the sods with my hands. There were dead bulbs in the soil and the roots of drowned plants. Only the apple tree had fruited, and bruised globes lay on the ground beneath it.

The box was still there, slightly bent and discoloured by the wet earth. For the first time in weeks I felt optimistic. 'Thank God for Osterley, Dad,' I heard myself say. I lifted it out, banged the lid with a stone, and forced it open. I unwound the rags. The mechanism looked a little rusty, but not too bad.

I should have been afraid of the gun. I knew the risk I ran keeping it in our quarter, even for a short period, was high. It went well past civil disobedience. Reports of robbery and rape were seldom punished with more than a reprimand now; the prison system could manage only the most serious offenders. Even black market agents and dealers were not often threatened with prosecution. But nobody was permitted to have a gun. Any kind of weapon, any suggestion of militia, was considered a direct attack on the Authority and the security of the country. Opposition meetings were sometimes broken up, if there had been a tip-off, and everyone present was searched. There were beatings, but no arrests. No one was stupid enough to carry a weapon.

To be detained meant entering an unknown system. At the factory, it was rumoured that there was a holding centre in one of the industrial cities to the south, Warrington or Lancaster, where those found guilty of severe crimes were sent. It was said there were executions. But there was no way of knowing if this was true. Radio and television broadcasts in the allocation hours were censored. There was no verification of what the structure of government really looked like now, whether it was impenetrable or whether it had vanished altogether, and in its place something else existed.

I knew all this, but I took the gun out of the box, rubbed the grease away, and put it in the shoulder bag I was carrying. I covered the hole with earth and looked at the patch of disrupted ground. Then, picking up two sticks, I went back to the refuse piles. I slid them under the rank body of the dog. I held my breath and lifted it up, brought it to the spot where I had been digging and lay it down. The hollow tunnel of its eye stared up at nothing. It was little more than a rotting pelt. I put the trowel back in the shed. Then I slipped home in the dusk.

The woman from the other quarter in our building was standing outside when I reached the terrace. I startled her as I came up to the door, the bag slung over my shoulder. She held a hand to her neck and apologised for crying out. In her other hand was a packet of cigarettes and a lighter. She waved them. 'Been saving these till I needed one,' she said. 'Thought you were on days this week. I heard you got out this morning. Clump, clump, clump. Bang.' I shrugged. I wanted to get inside before the grid was turned on and I would face the scrutiny of light bulbs. I hitched the bag further behind me. She seemed distressed somehow, and unaware that she was blocking the doorway. Her face in the grey atmosphere

was agitated and twitching, though she was standing rigidly. 'What are you doing out here?' I asked her. She snorted and shook her head. 'Nothing. What is there to do? Can't get our tea on yet, unless you want a cold lump. Can't find out which poor cows have won the baby lotto. I hate this time of day. It makes me crazy.'

She shook her head. 'Sometimes I can't believe it. Sometimes I wish they'd just dropped a bomb on us after all. Put us out of our misery. Don't you wish that?' She looked at me and then looked away into the alley opposite. 'It would be OK if I couldn't remember how things used to be. We went to Portugal every year. We used to fly.' She laughed bitterly and then began to cough. With brisk motions she took out a cigarette and lit it.

For a minute I felt a rush of sympathy and I wanted to befriend her, confide in her, and tell her what I was planning to do, the way I had not been able to tell Andrew. We'd never talked properly since she and her family had moved in. I had heard them through the walls, the muffled conversations, voices pitching and subsiding, the bouts of morning and evening coughing, and I'd heard them together at night, he louder than she. In our shared bathroom their footprints muddied the shower tray along with ours; their hair stuck on the enamel sides and clotted the plughole.

Some residents in the old sandstone quarters had made the best of things, abandoning privacy by opening up the house rooms like one big happy family. All our doors were kept shut. I barely knew the names of the other residents. They were so close by, so familiar, but they were strangers.

I knew it was a stupid thought to have had, spontaneous camaraderie with this woman I did not know, and I abandoned it almost immediately. I told myself I was just feeling it because I was conscious of where I was heading soon, and I had ideas in my head about it all. But I had to remain discreet. Nobody else was to know anything.

The woman looked at me again with an annoyed expression. 'Oh, it's all right. I'm just in a bad mood,' she said. 'Turns out I've got TB. That new bloody strain. Aye, so. I'm away into quarantine probably and the kids will have to contend with their father. They say there are some drugs that will help. But I know it's not true. Besides, I've got no money. Who the hell has? Oh, but they've given me this – for all the good it'll do!' She reached into her coat pocket, took out a faith card, and tossed it to the ground. She rolled her eyes. 'These bloody Victorian houses. I might as well put on a corset, sleep in the coal shed, and have done with it, right?'

She took a draw on the cigarette. I told her I was sorry, said goodnight, and went inside to the bedroom. I put the gun in the cupboard and made sure the barrel was fully covered by my overcoat. The cartridge boxes I placed under the bed next to a stack of magazines. It was too tiny an area for hiding anything but I had little choice.

For the rest of the week, I was filled with paranoia. Every time Andrew got in and out of the covers, I imagined him kicking the shells and scattering the metal casings across the room. There would be no hope of denying any knowledge of them. Our possessions were few and all were accounted for. In the nights that had followed I seemed to wake with a start every hour, reaching down to touch them, making sure they were properly stowed, praying he would not find them.

But now I was safely away, beyond exposure and explanation. I was alone. Here in the empty Lakeland village I couldn't have explained to anyone exactly how secure I felt, even if there had been someone around to listen to me. The village reverberated with silence, with human absence. There was not a soul to be found and I liked it. It had been so long since I had felt that. Even on the Beacon Hill above Rith I could see people moving in the streets and I knew they were close by. Here I was breathing air that no one else's breath competed for. I was no longer complicit in a wrecked and unregulated existence. I was not its sterile subject.

Standing opposite the gutted church, in the wet deserted roadway, something unassailable crept over me. I felt the arrival of a new calmness, an assurance of my own company. The only noises, other

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