

THE RING

And other
short stories



CORINNA EDWARDS-COLLEDGE

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&

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It was beautiful, and she wanted it.

A moment of madness and misplaced envy
leads Julie to a shocking discovery.

THE RING

She knows that the only reason she has been invited for the weekend is because; by some miracle, Izzy is popular. How, considering a traumatic start in life, and being raised by a stressed single mum, she has managed to come out as confident, caring and resilient is a source of constant amazement to Julie.

As she unpacks, these thoughts circle without conclusion, except to make her feel even anxious. She listens to the shrieks and giggles of the girls in the next room. Soon, another, deeper voice joins in the cacophony, it's John.

'Calm down girls!' She hears him shout over the din. 'Justin Bieber and Josh Hutcherson won't be arriving till six, so you've plenty of time to get ready.'

'Oh Da-a-a-d', Phoebe wails. 'Shut up, you're so sad!'

Julie smiles to herself as she hears John laughing, and then the creak of the stairs as he heads back to the kitchen. She takes her empty suitcase and slides it under the bed then goes over to the window. The trees in the garden have turned vibrant shades of gold and orange; behind them fields fall away towards the distant sea: a ribbon of steely blue underneath an over-cast sky.

Another wave of anxiety washes over her and she instinctively puts her hand to her stomach. Bryony always makes her feel like this; ever since she first saw her at the school gates, in her expensive skin-tight running gear, doing her stretches with her foot lodged high on the railings. Slim, toned Bryony made Julie feel like there was just too much of her; too much hair, too much breast, too much hip and thigh. It wasn't that Bryony was rude; in fact she had made a real effort to socialise with Julie once it was clear that her daughter, Olivia, and Izzy had become inseparable; but there was something about her that set Julie's teeth on edge. She was too perfect, her life was too perfect. She had a beautiful home and a handsome husband who was constantly putting up messages on Facebook about how wonderful and sexy his wife was. She had gone to their house once for dinner, and had vowed never to do it again. The people round the table had spent most of the night talking about vintage markets and house prices. Thank God John had been there or she would have had to feign food-poisoning just to get away.

She knows its kind of Bryony to have invited her to stay for the weekend, but she can't quite shake the small bitter feeling of resentment that Bryony owns not just one, but two homes, while Julie has to rent from a series of increasingly capricious and callous landlords. But she

swallows the feeling down into the pit of her stomach, grabs her wash bag and heads out of the room.

In the hall she can hear the girls chatting in their room; cautiously she stands just outside and leans her head towards the slightly open door. There is something irresistible about having the opportunity, even for a moment, to gain access to the breathless, secret world of the thirteen year old girl.

'Your dad's really nice.' She hears Izzy say.

'He's not, he's a right pain!'

'He is, he's funny and he's kind.'

'If you say so, it gets annoying after a while though, he's always trying to be my friend.'

'What about *your* dad Izzy?' It's Bryony's daughter, Olivia, talking now, 'why don't you ever mention him?'

Julie's heart tightens, she dares herself to lean in a little closer so she can hear Izzy's response. 'I haven't seen him in years -'

A hand appears on Julie's shoulder, she almost jumps out of her skin. She spins round, it's John, smiling at her. '*Naughty, naughty!*' he mouths silently. '*Oh fuck off!*' she mouths back. He puts his hands over his ears in mock-horror then turns and knocks at the girl's room. 'Come on you horrible lot, it's time for that walk.'

Groans emit from the room behind the door.

'No excuses, come on, then we'll come back and have tea and you can have your Lord of the Rings film marathon just like you wanted.'

He smiles at Julie then heads downstairs again. She is about to follow him but remembers the wash bag and crosses the hall to go into the bathroom. It's a pretty room with an old-fashioned suite, blue and white-checkerboard tiles and a striped wood floor. She puts her wash-bag on the window sill, and then something catches her eye. It's a ring, a large, ornate ring, on the sink to the left of the tap near the soap. She goes over, she recognises it. It's Bryony's, a lovely old art-deco one, with a large square citrine stone set in diamonds and an intricate platinum band decorated with angular leaves. She knows all this because at that dreaded dinner party, everyone had spent half an hour admiring the ring and Bryony had waxed lyrical about its provenance.

As if she is watching someone else's actions, Julie sees her hand go over to the ring, pick it up and put it in the pocket of her denim skirt. She feels curiously weightless and dreamy. She walks out of the bathroom and back into her own room. Once in, she shuts the door, listens out for the girls, then when she hears them spill noisily into the hall, she goes out too and follows them blithely down into the kitchen.

It's chilly outside and Julie slips her hands into her pockets as she walks. In her left pocket she holds the ring, it takes just seconds to warm in her

hand. The impossibility, the sheer naughtiness of its presence in her pocket gives her a strange sense of hyper-awareness, as if she is more visible, and more present. The sensation makes her feel pleasantly giddy.

John's wife, Shula, is walking ahead with Bryony and David; on walks or social occasions like this, she always seems to make sure there is distance between herself and her husband. She treats John with mild contempt, as if he is a slightly naughty child or annoying relative. John seems oblivious, or maybe he's just resigned to it. Either way it is good for Julie, she enjoys his company, and likes his kind face with its wide mouth, big brown eyes and trendy thick-framed black glasses.

By comparison, Bryony and David are, as usual, arm-in-arm. They are almost always touching, whatever social situation they are in. Julie finds these constant 'public displays of affection' annoying and unnecessary, or maybe it's just the stark light it casts on her own loneliness that upsets her.

John follows her gaze to the front of the little group. 'Well at least she's not running it this time.'

Julie looks up at him and frowns, 'What do you mean?'

I came up here last summer and she ran the route, up and down, past us three times, while we all walked it. Olivia was squirming with embarrassment, so she never did it again.'

Julie looks down at her own feet, in their battered converse high-tops, richly coloured mud has made its way up the side of the soles. 'I should start running, but I never seem to have the time.'

'Why on earth would you want to run, you cycle everywhere anyway.'

'Oh, you know, to lose a few pounds. You wouldn't want to see me in Bryony's running gear, I can tell you, I'd look like a string of sausages.'

He looks at her and shakes his head. 'Don't be daft you're lovely the way you are.' Their eyes lock for a moment, but then Izzy bounds up and flings her arm around Julie's neck. 'Come on mum, I'll race you to the next tree.'

When they get back the girls flock into the living room to start their Lord of the Rings film-marathon, and the adults disperse: Bryony to shower, David and John to the kitchen to start on the food, and Shula and Julie follow Bryony up the stairs to get changed. When she gets into her room, Julie sits on the edge of her bed. She knows she should feel panicked, Bryony has gone into the bathroom, she's bound to see the ring has gone. And yet she isn't scared, instead she feels a strange kind of calm. She smiles at herself and goes over to the wardrobe, she puts on her favourite dress, a fifties style one with a cinched waist and a full skirt. She drops the ring into one of the dress' patch-pockets and feels its weight fall satisfyingly against the cloth. There's a bright red lipstick

that she wants but she realises it is in her wash bag in the bathroom. She bumps into Bryony in the hall; she's still wet from her shower and is clutching her towel around her, her face looks pale against the saturated darkness of her hair.

'Julie, you haven't seen my ring about have you? You know, the big vintage one that I inherited from my grandmother?'

Julie feels a gentle composure settle over her face, she looks Bryony straight in the eye. 'No, but I'm sure it will turn up, where did you last have it?'

'In the bathroom, I'm sure that's where left it, on the side of the sink.'

'Show me.' says Julie in a soft voice and Bryony clutches at her arm and leads her into the bathroom.

'There,' she gestures, 'right by the tap.'

Julie looks at the sink keenly then pulls out the old-fashioned plug. 'Look, there's no grille over the plug-hole. It could have slid down.'

'Shit, shit shit!' Bryony starts to bite at the side of her thumb.

'Go and get David, he can undo the u-bend, it could be there.'

Bryony brightens. 'Thanks Julie, that's a good idea!'

After she's gone, Julie goes over to the windowsill, retrieves her make-up bag and carefully applies the bright-red lipstick.

She feels more alive that evening than she has in years. It's as if the ring in her pocket is emitting some kind of power, a subtle electricity that leaves her feeling vivacious and sexy. Everyone tries to console Bryony, David says that the ring is worth ten grand, he goes upstairs and inspects the u-bend. Of course, he doesn't find anything. Julie suggests they put a sieve under the bottom of the drain-pipe outside to catch the ring in case it gets washed down; she says her mother had found her wedding ring this way, but this is a lie. David gets a sieve and goes outside. She flirts constantly but invisibly with John. He can barely keep his eyes off her. Shula, of course, doesn't notice. Bryony is as articulate and charismatic as ever, but there is a brittleness about her and she is drinking steadily.

At around eleven Julie goes into the living room to take the girls some crisps and drinks. As she enters the room a rasping voice says suddenly: '*What's it got in its pocket? Is it the ring?*' and Julie's heart beats jarringly against her ribs and she realises how drunk she is.

Izzy smiles as she takes the crisps from her mum's frozen out-stretched hand. 'Don't worry mum, it's only Gollum!'

Julie nods numbly, she needs some air. She avoids seeing the others by going through to the hall and out of the front door. The moon is bright, and the jagged shadows of trees cut across the wide lawn like black lightning strikes. As she rounds the corner of the house she bumps into Bryony who has a cigarette clamped in her right hand.

'Bryony I...I didn't think you smoked?'

'I said I was coming out to check the sieve, and make sure I hadn't dropped my ring in the garden. David's so angry.' Bryony's voice shakes slightly as she speaks.

'Let's go in, it's really cold and you're trembling. . '

Bryony doesn't seem to hear her. 'Do you know why I run?'

Julie shakes her head.

'Because every time I do, I think maybe I'll just keep running and get away...but then I think about the girls.'

'I don't understand - '

'He doesn't let me do anything on my own.' She blurts out, louder now. 'He watches me all the time. He checks my phone all the time. I can't breathe, I don't know what to do. When I try to talk to him about it he just tells me I'm stupid. I hate sleeping with him now, it turns my stomach when he...' She takes a sharp drag on her cigarette. 'I'm sorry, I shouldn't be telling you this. I...I don't know why I'm telling you this. It's not like he's ever hit me or anything like that. I'm being stupid, I'm just a bit drunk.'

Julie hesitates then reaches over and touches Bryony lightly on the arm. 'I've never told anyone this; but that's how it was with Izzy's dad. It took me years to have the guts to leave him, but I did, in the end. Give me a puff on that.' She reaches out for the cigarette.

'But you don't smoke either?'

'No, not any more. But sometimes it just feels good.'

They catch each other's eyes for a moment. 'You know it's only going to get worse, don't you?'

Bryony looks away, hugging herself against the chilly night air.

'If you look deep inside yourself,' Julie continues, 'you know it.'

Bryony takes the cigarette back and sucks on it sharply. 'Yes. I know.' She stubs out the cigarette and looks anxiously back at the house.

'Here.' Julie takes Bryony's hand, turns it over and opens out her fingers. She reaches into her pocket, takes out the ring and lays it in her friend's palm.

Bryony looks up at her, frowning. 'I don't understand, why?'

'I'm sorry. I thought you had something I wanted...but...'

Bryony nods, slides the ring back onto her finger and looks at it abstractedly. 'What do I do now?'

Julie puts her hand on Bryony's shoulder. 'First things first, we've got to go back inside. We can say we just found the ring in the sieve. And then tomorrow, well, you're not alone now; I'll help you.'

They turn back towards the house, but Bryony pauses for a moment and studies her hand. Moonlight catches in the diamonds of her ring and casts sparks out into the dark.

'Thanks for finding it.' she whispers.



Why had she forgotten the little ones?

An email from the most unexpected of places unlocks a childhood mystery.

The Little Ones

The smells of my childhood: the sweet-sour grassy aroma of the rabbit hutch; the nose-tingling eucalyptus of a pine berry squashed between the fingers; the sunshine scent of a cheap orange ice-lolly as it melts and runs down your hand. The sounds of my childhood: the wood pigeons' soft morning hooting; the rattle of bottles in the milk float; the soft murmur of adult voices in the kitchen below my bedroom. The sights of my childhood: the green-glass eyes of my beloved cat, Zoey, the small pink Hawthorn berries on my bedroom wallpaper; Mrs Percival with her long pearly-white hair and small dry smile.

The email sitting in my inbox is from DPBrown72@gmail.com (a name I don't recognise) and has the subject line *A message about Mrs Percival*. This name I do remember, and it is why I have now descended into a deep nostalgic daydream. I take a gulp of wine and it brings me back to the present, and I feel a small wave of shame. I argued with the kids before they went to bed, and it ended with my losing my temper and saying something I swore I'd never say *If you don't like it here, you can always go and live with your father!*

Was I as difficult and lazy as my kids are when I was a teenager? I try to remember, and it dislodges a memory of going to the old house on Edge Lane with a teenage friend, many years after we'd left home. I'd been amazed to find Mrs Percival still there in number 48; more stooped, thinner, her wrinkles a little deeper, but still very much Mrs Percival, with her watchful bird-like face.

The first time I saw her was when I was about eight, so it must have been in 1977. My neighbour's son, Daniel, and I were both lonely, awkward kids who found solace in each other and became inseparable. We lived in the two sides of a grand Victorian semi-detached house in Manchester and were both the kids of busy single mums. It was a different time then; on non-school days children were put out of the door after breakfast with a sandwich for lunch and a bottle of pop. Hours later you would reluctantly leave the day's adventures behind you, and answer the call of your name across the darkening garden. It was an idyllic: no screens, virtually technology-free existence, with nothing but mud, trees and bicycles to while away the long Summer days.

My mind drifts again. It is a Wednesday, sometime in August, and so hot that the tarmac on the road outside the front of our houses has gone soft. Daniel and I are digging it up with bits of fallen slate that we found

in the front garden. We are sweaty and bored and beginning to get a bit fractious.

Daniel sighs, then speaks. 'Let's play police hunt again, we could catch some diamond robbers?'

I hold my sticky fingers to my nose and breathe the aniseedy-petrol smell of the tarmac in deeply. 'Nah, that's boring.'

'Ok let's play dens. We could make a fire and use that old pan to make garden stew in again.'

'Nah, we did that yesterday.'

Daniel makes a *hummph* sound and closes his mouth tight.

I take a sideways squinting look at the old house next door. As usual the windows are blank and impenetrable behind their heavy curtains; but the lawn, as ever, is mysteriously mown; the flower beds mysteriously neat. We've never seen a gardener here though, and I've begun to wonder if elves do it in the night. In all our short lives we've never seen anyone in the house either, no sign of life, no lights or sounds, so whenever we go near it, we feel a frisson of fear.

'Let's go into the garden.'

Daniel follows my gaze and his face blanches behind his freckles. 'We can't go in there!'

'Why?' I suddenly feel a bit mean and reckless. 'Are you chicken?'

'No, but -'

'But what?'

'That house is wrong, it looks like it's waiting for us.'

I have pins and needles in my legs so stand up and stretch. 'They're probably just really rich and live in India or something and they have a servant to keep it really nice for them for when they get back.' I reach down and take his hand, 'Come on.' reluctantly he lets me take it and pull him up.

I lead the way towards the house, hugging close to the high, granite front walls. We reach the entrance. There's a broad sweep of gravel drive ending at two lion-topped gate posts. The house has a name, chiselled deep into the dark stone: *Hascombe*. I hesitate on the threshold, but the shame in being called a coward over a dare I have imposed on myself, is infinitely worse than any other outcome of trespassing that I can imagine.

I take a deep breath and step over the boundary from paving stone to gravel and Daniel follows. We teeter at the end of the drive with nerves and indecision. The lawn rises up towards the house in a steep bank. I grab hold of Daniel's sleeve and pull him towards it. We race over and flop down to a squat at the bottom, it offers us some protection from the blank-eyed gaze of the big old house. I dare myself to stand up a bit and peek over the top of the bank, there's a menace about the place, even in the bright sunshine. The air vibrates with the buzzing of bees.

I get up, dragging Daniel up to stand beside me. 'There's no-one there, come on, let's go round the back.'

'I don't know, I-'

I run on ahead, knowing that though naturally timid, Daniel's pride won't let him be outdone by a mere girl. He follows me silently.

We skirt around the front garden and turn the corner where the grand front door sits on its broad steps. We run past it as fast as we can and I feel a sudden chill run over me and the hairs spring up on my arms and legs. A high stone wall runs across the drive and there's a half-rotten wooden door set in it by the corner where it meets the house. Breathlessly we skirt along the edge of the drive until we get to it. I try the old rusted handle and to my heart-stopping surprise, the door opens easily.

It takes us a while to take in what we are seeing, like the adjustment of your eyes when you come out of a dark cinema into the white-light of the outside world. Ahead of us is a walled kitchen garden, to our right is a huge ornate greenhouse, at least thirty feet long. The glass is misty with age, huge plants inside pressing against the foggy panes like eager faces. We approach the entrance cautiously and peek in. The scene inside is like a prehistoric jungle, and I half expect a dinosaur's head to push through the tropical foliage and snag me with its hard lizard-like eyes. There are old tree-ferns, grown so tall that their heads are bent against the roof, like tall men stooping in a low room. In amongst the dark glossy foliage, the bright fleshy flower heads of orchids twinkle like scattered jewels. There's an overwhelming smell of green things, and growth and life that it is intoxicating. For a moment Daniel looks like he is caught in a beautiful dream, but then the expression on his face seems to liquify and re-set into one of utter terror. His eyes are fixed on the air behind me, but before I can turn, a white wizened hand has clamped itself on my shoulder and a thin reedy voice proclaims 'what are you little monsters doing in my garden?!'

We sip the sweet milky tea and inspect Mrs Percival over the rims of our china cups. I am glad that I've stopped shaking. She is tiny, not much bigger than me. Her skin is wrinkled and papery and her long white hair hangs loose over her shoulders. She sits very straight, with her hands folded primly in her lap. She's wearing a grey dress, high necked and long sleeved, a Beatrix Potter style white apron and battered old clogs. She smiles at me in a shrewd, but not unpleasant way. I take another sip of my tea and it goes down the wrong way. I'm terrified of staining the beautiful embroidered table-cloth in front of me, so I manage to keep my mouth shut and the splutter happens entirely internally like a firework going off in a tin. Wordlessly, Mrs Percival passes me a cotton handkerchief to wipe my face with, it smells of lavender.

She puts her hands back in her lap. 'We used to use this room all the time when I was young, but I only open it up for guests now.'

'It's b-b-b-beautiful.' Daniel stutters.

Mrs Percival looks around the room with a satisfied air. 'I've left it exactly as it was'.

We spend the next couple of hours in a kind of enchantment. Mrs Percival gives us a tour of the house, and we follow her funny hobbling steps, our minds bubbling with questions. There's a grand dining room with a sixteen-seater mahogany table stretching towards the bay windows like a fallen monolith; a scullery and kitchen with a huge old range and deep butlers sinks; bedrooms with big iron beds so high and rounded with quilts and eiderdowns that they remind me of the illustrations in *The Princess and the Pea*; bathrooms with chess-board tiles and claw-footed baths so big and deep you could almost swim in them. But the room that strikes us the deepest, the room we will come back to many times over the next four years is the nursery. This is no ordinary nursery, this is a cathedral like room with huge windows, crammed with dolls-houses, play-tents, dressing-up clothes and numerous antique toys that are simultaneously beautiful and creepy. But most wonderful of all is the huge wooden gymnastics frame that stretches from floor to ceiling; festooned with ropes and hoops and criss-crossed with balancing frames and ladders.

Mrs Percival smiles benignly at our astonishment. 'This is where I see the little ones. I would play here with my brother and sister. There was so much happiness in this room.'

I lay a hand tentatively, longingly, on the old wooden frame. Can we?...

She nods. 'Yes, do.'

Daniel and I swap a look of silent joy. 'Race you!' I shout, and start to scale to the top of nearest ladder. Daniel is up after me like a shot. 'I win!' I pant triumphantly, and press my hand against the yellowed roof to steady myself. I look up and my heart stops. There are two small dusty handprints on the ceiling next to mine, and under each a name is written in faded pencil. My chest constricts with a strange kind of sadness and suddenly I want to be back on the ground. Daniel watches me with confusion as I rush back down the ladder. Mrs Percival has a faraway look in her eyes. 'Yes, the little ones love it here, they always do.'

The memory has left me feeling strangely tearful, and I wipe at my eyes with the back of my hand. I click on the email and open it:

Dear Diana

I don't know if you remember me, and I hope you don't mind my having looked you up, but it's Daniel here, we used to be good friends many years ago, and I have very happy memories of that time. The reason I've got in touch is that I recently, by sheer chance, found out something quite extraordinary about our old neighbour, Mrs Percival. Do you remember the play-room, and how Mrs Percival would talk about the 'little ones', herself and her brother and her sister? Remember how we always presumed that she was an old spinster? Well she wasn't. She did grow up in that house, but she was an only child and the children that used that playroom before us were her own children, Lotty and Jacob. They died in the second world war just weeks after their dad, when a stray bomb hit the farm they were sent to as Evacuees. Mrs Percival thought they'd be safe there, and apparently she couldn't live with the guilt and shut herself away until we found her. Isn't that sad?

I can't read any more, My heart is beating fast and I'm half-blinded by tears. I rush up the stairs and go into my children's bedrooms one, then the other. I sit by their beds and stroke their hair, stare into the impossible beauty of their sleeping faces. Lotty and Jacob, the names I have unconsciously given my own children, but also, I remember for the first time in all these years, the faded pencil names scratched on the ceiling of that extraordinary room.



Everyone has a blind spot
But they aren't always where they seem.

THE BLIND SPOT

Good Morning, you must be Mr Brown? You are? Wonderful, and you're waiting for your guide? Good. I'm Maureen, I'm from the Centre. Now if you don't mind, could you please put out that cigarette, I have very delicate lungs and even the slightest bit of second-hand smoke can inflame my bronchioles. Yes, that's it, stub it out, marvellous, and I'd very much appreciate it if you don't smoke again on our walk. You aren't going to leave it there on the pavement are you, Mr Brown? Oh, you can't see it can you, never mind, let me put it in the bin for you. Now do take my arm and we can begin. Careful of the curb, easy does it, well done.

Do you know this is my first trip as a sighted guide for the blind and visually impaired? I finished my training last week. It was very thorough you know, but I have to say I wasn't entirely impressed, there were no biscuits you see. *Cuts to budgets* they say, but one does wonder.

- Now we're going to walk straight for about 50 yards but there's a raised curb at the end. Don't worry though, I'll take it slow - please don't just stop like that or we could both take a tumble! That's better.

So, as I was saying, *cuts to budgets* that was their excuse. But you hear all the time about the amount of money charities are wasting. If I donate to a charity I expect it to go to the people it tells us it is helping, not to pay for *social media* consultants or *diversity officers*. Does anybody even know what these people do? Do you? No, I didn't think so.

- Here's the curb I told you about - ah now didn't you do that well Mr Brown! I can see you are going to be a very easy...now what did they say you were? Service user? Or was it client? I know you're not a patient, they told someone off on the course for saying that; perhaps it was mentee? Well, let's stick with *client* shall we? At least I know what that means.

So we are just skirting the park now. I've been told to describe the scene for you, apparently it will help your neural pathways, whatever they are. When they took a scan of Derek's brain after he was diagnosed, I can't say I could see any *pathways* in it. Anyway, I digress, it's a very nice park.

- Careful here some of the paving slabs are a bit uneven, no doubt the council will say that's down to cuts too but goodness knows what they are spending their money on if they can't even keep the pavements safe and the bins empty - that's it, very well done.

So apparently this park was gifted to the local authority in 1893 and has two of the country's oldest Beech trees in it. I bet you didn't know that, did you Mr Brown? When I told the volunteer trainer that I was going to research accompanying historical facts for my walks she did

everything she could to undermine the idea, said we should focus on *the mindfulness elements of the walk, the colours, the way the trees move in the breeze, la-di-da*, I ask you. What a lot of nonsense. Luckily for you, however, I held fast and followed my instincts and you'll be pleased to know that I have prepared some pertinent nuggets of historical and cultural information to accompany our walk. No, no need to say anything, it's my pleasure.

- Ah now, there's a tricky bit coming up, three steps and the middle one is a little cracked. No, don't let go of my arm, if you let go I'm sure we're no longer insured or something; that's one step, well done, now the second...excellent.

So now I can tell you that we are approaching the old well. There's a myth around this well. That for decades it had been dry, and was about to be abandoned, until a young local woman, who was sad because her beau hadn't returned from a perilous sea voyage, filled it with her tears and that it has provided fresh spring water ever since. It's a silly story, I know, but rather sweet. Do you know it was turned into a giant (now I hope this won't offend you but I don't know how else to tell you without being specific) it was turned into a *giant breast* for some festival or other last year, a festival for *LBGP* people or something. I forget now, it's a terrible abbreviation and is constantly growing. I believe there's a plus sign on there now as well. They did explain it at the training, some more diversity nonsense or other; and do you know the trainer referred to it as an acronym instead of an abbreviation! I ask you! And she seemed most displeased when I pointed out her error; you would think she'd be grateful, but that's young people for you. Can't take criticism these days.

Now, back to our walk. We have a nice straight stretch down this path now. You might be able to hear the tennis courts on our left. My neighbour has taken up tennis again after thirty years. Every day she leaves the house in a ridiculous white mini skirt and a sweat band. Goodness knows what she's thinking. She spends too much time in the sun and her knees look like prunes. No sign of her on the courts today though, thank goodness.

I believe there is a sensory garden at the bottom of this path; the trainer said it was an excellent spot for our *mindfulness practice*. Apparently, you should rub your fingers on the herbs in the raised beds and enjoy the aroma. One can only hope that someone hasn't let their dog relieve itself on them but I don't suppose our trainer would bother herself with details like that.

Here we are. Now, Mr Brown, please be careful, there is a low gate, I'm going to lead you through it; it will take about five steps – that's it, well done, you're through. Why on earth would they put a gate on a sensory garden that's designed for blind people like yourself? It's hardly

accessible is it. Or maybe they're worried that some thug is going to run off with their municipal Rosemary bushes?

Look...ah, sorry, I mean...*feel* here, it's sage, I do love sage. Don't be shy, Mr Brown, let me take your hand. There it is, now give it a good rub. That's it. Now get it right under your nose – oops, sorry, I didn't mean to make you poke yourself in the eye, let me get you a hanky – no? Well, if you're sure you're all right. Derek, he loved a bit of sage, I'd put some in my Yorkshire puddings. Now, I know what you're thinking, Sage in a Yorkshire pudding, when there's beef on the table! But can I make a confession to you Mr Brown, I feel like I know you now that we have spent this time together; Derek and I were partial to roast pork with our Yorkshire pudding. I know! I'm a rebel at heart! *You always have to be different* Derek would say; *you have an opinion on everything*, ah, how we would laugh. No one knew me as well as Derek did.

How lovely, here's some marjoram. Ah, before you touch it let me clean the smell of the sage from your fingers or you won't get the benefit of it. No, I insist, I've brought some wipes. Do keep still or I can't do it properly, that's better, all clean now; you can get right in there and give it a good rub. Rather undervalued herb, Marjoram, it's become a bit old fashioned but I like it. Now, I know what you're thinking, *why does she keep referring to Derek in the past tense?* I'm right aren't I? Of course I am. Well, you see, Derek died last year...I do apologise, bear with me a moment I just need to... where's my handkerchief, ah, there it is. That's better.

Yes, he died of a stroke. Rather unexpected, he was a man of few vices. His sister said she thought he died of exhaustion but I don't know where she got that from, he'd been retired for five years. So here I am. Have you finished with that sprig of Marjoram Mr Brown? Do be careful, you've virtually ground it to a pulp. I'll have to pull that bit off now or the plant will look scruffy. That's it, let go...ah...got it.

As you may have worked out by now, Mr Brown, I'm not one for moping about doing nothing so when Derek had gone and I found I had time on my hands I immediately thought of volunteering, and here I am! It is satisfying to know that one can do good for others, gives one a warm glow if you know what I mean.

Sorry, quiet a moment, Mr Brown, I believe that is my phone, excuse me. Ah, it's my daughter. Humph, just a text, I *hate* texts. What's that, Mr Brown? Sorry, I can't talk and text at the same time, do be quiet for a moment...There, that's that done. She's just reminding me about the cake for my grandson's birthday; quite unnecessary, when have I ever forgotten anything? And she's suggesting I make a vegan cake, I ask you. The day will never come that I replace butter for vegetable oil and cream for coconut milk in a Victoria sponge and that's all I have to say on the matter!

I don't like to say it, but my daughter is what one calls a *scatty* person. She is forever losing or breaking things, her hair is always in a mess and she has the most appalling taste in clothes. I would help out more but the silly girl decided to go and live a three-hour drive away. Goodness knows why.

I don't know if you ever feel like this, Mr Brown, but sometimes, at the end of the day, I sit at the kitchen table and everything is so very quiet, that I feel like I may just fade away. There's that strange argument, isn't there, if a tree falls in a forest and there is no-one there to witness it, does it make a sound? Sometimes I feel like the tree in the empty forest, that without someone in the kitchen with me, maybe all that is there is an empty chair.

Anyway, listen to me waffling away. We must press on, if we are to have time to go to the café and get a nice cup of tea; and perhaps some cake if you are so inclined. Please take my arm again, that's it, hold on nice and tight. Off we go.

'Please!'

Mr Brown, don't stop suddenly like that, you've made my glasses fall off!

'Please, just stop talking and listen to me for a moment!'

What do you mean, Mr Brown? All I've done for the last forty-five minutes is listen to you.

'I'm - not - blind!'

But you are Mr Brown?

'Yes.'

And you were waiting for a guide?

'I was waiting for a guide to *show me around the centre.*'

Not a *sighted* guide?

'No, my wife has macular degeneration and I was visiting to find out more about how the centre may be able to help.'

Well for goodness sake, why didn't you say so?

'I tried! Look, Maureen, thank you, I had a very....interesting walk with you and I'm sorry to hear about your husband, but I must go now. My wife will be getting worried.'

It was just a silly mistake, there's no need to go. Why don't we go to the café anyway? I don't know about you but I've worked up a terrible thirst.

'I really should go - '

Of course, you must go, don't you worry about me. I'm sure there's something I can find to do at home - '

'Ah...I...ok then. I suppose another ten, fifteen minutes or so won't make any difference.'

'Wonderful! This way Mr Brown!'



She's been waiting for him since she was a girl. Is tonight the night he will finally come?

STARS

It was the sound, the deep throbbing hum that woke Kate up from her dreamless semi-drugged sleep. She let her eyes flutter open, they took a while to focus; what she saw were parallel bands of yellow-white light, stark against the dark ceiling. The humming sounds softened to a purr, like an engine ticking over, and the bands of light shifted, moving down the room through the small gaps in the curtains. Kate sighed and closed her eyes again, but found that she couldn't settle. Old age played havoc with sleep - it either withheld it, or forced it on you when you least wanted it. And since she'd gone on drugs to help with the pain, it had an even more disorientating power over her.

After accepting that she wasn't going to be able to get back to sleep, Kate allowed herself to wonder what was causing the lights and the noise. It was the first time in many months she had thought about the world beyond her bed at all; it had become her second skin, a cushioned life-boat on her slow and confusing descent into illness. Any kind of movement had the potential to hurt now, so even the smallest - bending a knee, raising her arm - had to be planned out with military precision.

Cautiously she turned her head towards the clock on her bedside table. 2.50am the hologram projection said, six long hours till her carer came to change her, wash her and do her physio. A sense of desperation and loneliness rolled over her like a wave. She took an involuntary sharp gasping breath as if she was in danger of being drowned by it.

'Kate!' She heard a voice, whispered but clear, from outside.

Her next breath froze in her chest, it wasn't possible, it couldn't be, not after all this time.

'Kate, come here!' The voice repeated, more urgently this time.

'I...' Her voice cracked before she could get the words out. *It can't be, it just can't be!* She swallowed hard.

'I'm here, come on Kate, I can't wait much longer!'

It was in this room, this very room, seventy years ago that she had first fantasised about him coming to rescue her from her miserable, constrained teenage existence. And now, after all these years...'I...I'm coming.' She gripped the duvet hard with her right hand, bent her left knee so the sole of her foot was flat on the mattress and pulled herself on to her right side. She had expected nauseating pain, had her teeth gritted against the likelihood of it, but to her huge relief and surprise it didn't come. Almost blithely she went from her side to sitting upright on the bed, swung her legs over the side with a small 'Ha!' of triumph.

It was a hot summer, and the floorboards were warm under her bare feet. She walked cautiously but painlessly to the window and reached out towards the curtains; she stopped, her hands were trembling. For the first time in years she noticed how old her hands looked, the liver-spot mottling, veins standing out under her skin like bent twigs. She nearly went back to bed, but something stopped her. It felt so good to be upright again, maybe she had been given a second chance, maybe against all the odds she was in remission. Either way, she had to know, she had to know if it was *him* waiting outside the window.

She pulled the curtain apart a fraction, pressed her eye to the gap and looked down into the dark street. She gasped. It *was* him, just as she had imagined all those years ago: compact, handsome, alert, and standing just below her window! Behind him his X-Wing spacecraft filled the street, the steam from its hydraulics billowing from its underbelly. The far-side wing had narrowly missed a street-lamp, its tip was parallel with the neighbour's bedroom window – landing-light blinking. The hull of the ship was streaked with dirt and the scars of laser-cannon blasts.

She pressed her hand against the glass of the window. 'Luke!'

He was holding his helmet against his side and gestured impatiently with his free arm. 'Yes, it's me Kate, now *come on!*' He looked nervously up and down the street. 'We haven't got much time, they'll be waking up soon.'

She nodded mutely and pointed downwards to signify that she would meet him outside the front door. He smiled broadly and waved.

She turned from the window, her hand over her mouth. This was it, it was really happening. For months after seeing the last of the original Star Wars films when she was fourteen she had imagined this moment. Her mum and dad had just split up, she was a late developer and left behind by her friends who already had bras and boyfriends. In Luke Skywalker she had seen someone for whom these things were mere trivia – he had a universe to save. And there was a beauty about his face, and damage too – as if he had been broken up and put back together again.

Each time, all those years ago, when she had imagined him coming for her, she had wondered if she really would be able to leave everything behind and fly away with him. It had made her realise that perhaps she *did* still love her mum and dad, despite their seeming destruction of everything she had held dear; perhaps after all she *could* wait for her body to start to make the long journey towards womanhood.

And now, how easy would it be now? She'd worked as hard at being a good wife as she could, but neither of her marriages had stuck. She'd put her children first all her life and been a lively and involved

grandmother; but then the ravenous wolf of cancer, a disease that even by 2053 they hadn't managed to completely eradicate, had finally sunk its teeth into her. For five years now it had been slowly and painfully ripping her away from her family, she had felt herself a little more adrift each day; numbed and exhausted by pain and the effort involved in staying alive. But now, as she paused by her bedroom door and tightened her dressing-gown around her, she saw the faces of all those that she loved and that loved her, and they were smiling.

She trotted down the stairs as if she was a young woman, her hair coming loose and falling down around her shoulders. When she opened the front-door Luke rushed up to her and held her and she buried her face in his neck, pushed her fingers into his thick dark-blond hair.

He pulled himself away from her and took her hand. 'Come on Kate, it's time to go now.' She smiled and followed him, let him lead her up the entry ramp and into the ship's cockpit. It was cramped and strangely old-fashioned looking. The flight seats were made of scuffed brown-leather, the dashboard screens curved at the sides, their displays showing diagrams in green LCD. It was nothing like the commercial spacecraft of the present – all sleek white and high-resolution touch screens. It was an antique, just like her.

Luke gestured for her to sit down in the passenger seat beside him. She smiled and settled herself into it, clicked the aviator-style safety belt into place in her lap.

'So where do you want to go?'

She smiled and gestured with her index finger. 'Up.'

...

They gather round her, some standing, some perching on the edge. The kids play around the periphery of the room, occasionally radiating towards the bed to take a peek.

A sad looking woman sits down and takes hold of Kate's hand. 'Do you think her breathing has settled down a bit Paul?'

'Maybe, it's hard to tell.'

'Do you think she can see us?'

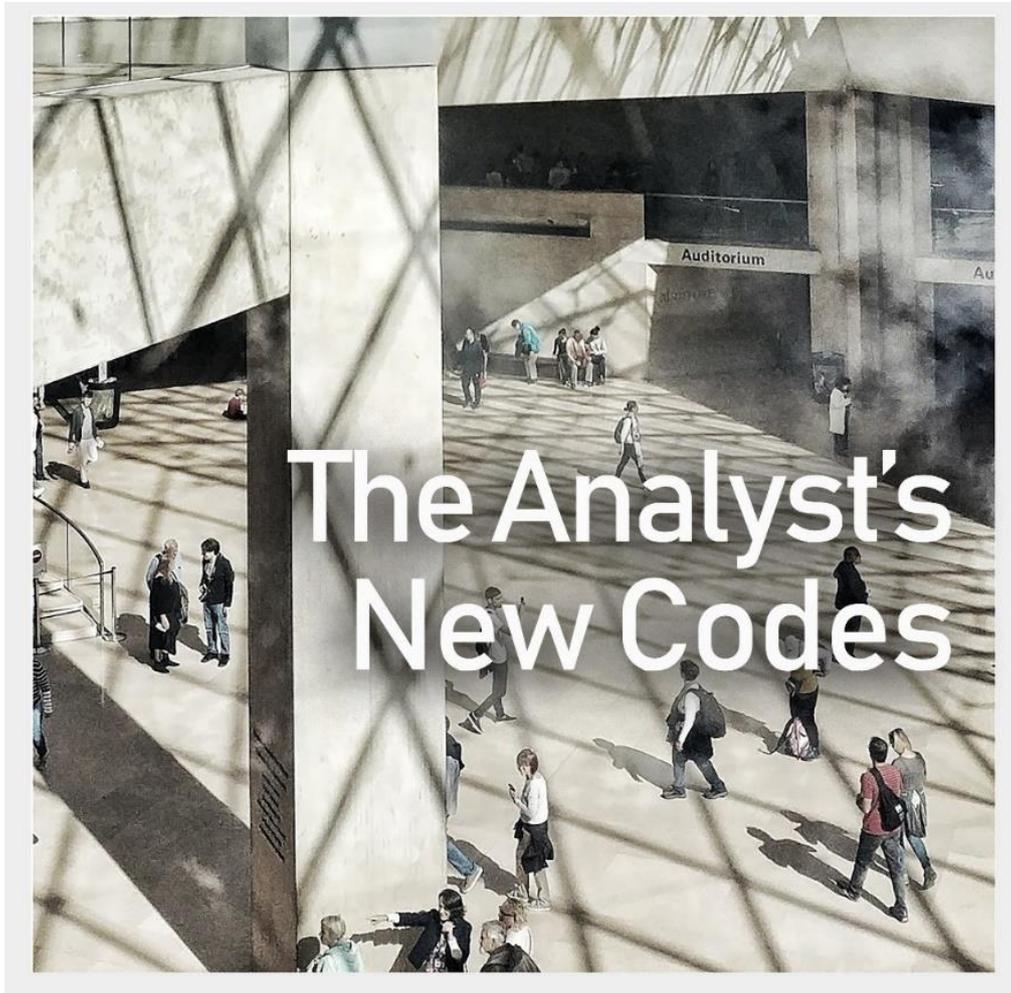
He sighs. "I don't know Em, she could be aware of everything, or maybe she's already gone?'

'Oh God!' The woman begins to sob, one of the children appears by her side, looks up at her. 'Is Nanna going to die Mummy?'

She scoops up the little girl and puts her on her lap, smooths her hair back from her face. 'Yes, I think so Molly. But she's very old and she's had a good life.' The girl climbs off her mum's lap and onto the bed. 'Molly, don't do that, you might –'

'It's all right Em, let her go, she can't do any harm, she just wants to say goodbye.'

The little girl crawls along the side of the bed until she is just below the pillow. She reaches out and touches her grandmother's pale cheek, leans in and looks intently into the old lady's dilated eyes. She turns and tugs at her Mother's hand. 'Mummy, look...Nanna's got stars inside her!'



**Does anyone in Tricorn Corporate Analytics
know what it is that they actually do?**

Harassed intern, Lucy Brewerton, is about to
find out.

The Analyst's New Codes

As her eyes focused on the glossy panorama that rolled itself out in front of Tricorn's fifteenth floor offices, Lucy felt her mind drift. Her elevated view-point presented the city as highly coloured and miniaturised, as if it had been designed by a Lego-obsessive. It looked clean and orderly, but she knew that the truth, at street-level, was somewhat different.

She took a deep breath. The moist underarm, heart trilling pervasive sense of panic that she had become used to ever since accepting the internship at Tricorn was returning.

Daniel's voice barked at her from the end of the corridor, making her jump.

'Lucy! We need to go over the Peverill Account!'

She wiped away the bloom of sweat that had appeared on her top lip. 'Coming Daniel.'

'Quickly, I've only got five minutes to talk you through the prep for the meeting at 3.'

She trotted down the corridor and into the air-conditioned comfort of his office. 'So, what do you want me to do for the meeting?'

He looked at her and frowned. 'What do you think?' he said, impatiently, 'I've done the analysis and I need you to tabulise the indicators and strategise a summary.'

'I,' she hesitated, should she say it? She had to. 'I'm sorry but I'm not sure I have quite got my head around this area of work, I've only had a brief induction, and I've not got a good level of understanding yet.'

Daniel sat down in his leather swivel chair with a grunt. 'We've got a long waiting list of people who want internships here, if you don't think you're up for it, there's plenty of people who are.'

She felt herself colour; she wasn't stupid, her university result proved that; but the work they did at Tricorn felt like a dark-art. With every question she asked to try to get clarity, the more layers of complexity and opacity she uncovered. 'I just feel I might need a little more...coaching on this?'

Daniel glared at her and ran a tanned, manicured hand through his thinning light-brown hair. 'Apply S.M.A.R.T to it. That's my advice.'

'I'm sorry, I'm not great on acronyms, can you remind me what that stands for?'

He went to say something then stuttered slightly. 'Serious.' He said, finally. 'Mindful...Analysed...Real Targets. Just apply them.'

'Oh, ok.' That really didn't sound right to her. 'Thanks.'

'I've emailed the spreadsheet to you. It needs a bit of tidying up, but I've done most of the work. I've decided *you* can present it,' he said, airily, 'be a good CPD opportunity.' He flashed an insincere, joyless grin then dismissed her with a wave of his hand.

The hot air in the open plan office was filled with the urgent noises of phone-chatter and keyboard clicks. Lucy tried to concentrate on the spreadsheet in front of her; but although, independently, the words made sense – words like 'learning', 'profile', 'focused' and 'collateral'; together they seemed to morph into a language that might as well have been Klingon, or Elvish. What, for example, was an 'Implementation matrix' or a 'gap-analysis framework?'

She struggled on, time moved remorselessly forward, and with each passing minute her sense of panic increased. Her breathing became thin and strained, her mind seemed to have turned into blancmange, she was sure she could smell something acrid coming from her armpits. She looked around her in despair, no-one looked back; everyone else seemed to understand what they were doing. Could she really be the only one? *Why oh why did I choose this internship?* She thought for about the hundredth time that month. As she continued to debate this, and stare, with unseeing eyes, at the spreadsheet on the screen in front of her, she had an epiphany. It came over her with a delicious shudder; and when it did, it made such sense that she simply couldn't believe she hadn't thought of it before. She turned back to her laptop screen with a new sense of vigour and motivation.

When she entered the board-room she looked around the table at the procession of cleanly shaven faces; from the taut and young to the old and sagging, and smiled brightly. Daniel stood to introduce her.

'Everyone, I would like to introduce you to Lucy Brewerton. Our most recent intern. She is going to present Tricorn's analysis of Peverill's future progression opportunities. And don't worry,' he wagged a finger at them, 'I didn't leave such an important piece of work to a mere intern,' there was a low ripple of laughter, 'I strategized it myself and have just asked Lucy to pull it into presentable order.' He looked up at her sharply. 'Isn't that right Lucy?'

Lucy glanced back at him and smiled sweetly. 'Oh yes, Daniel, absolutely. This really is entirely your work. Word-for-word.' Daniel nodded, sat down and wiped his forehead with an ironed handkerchief.

'So!' Lucy plugged her laptop into the overhead projector. 'If I can just ask you gentlemen, to look at the screen.' There was a silence, punctuated only by the soft whirring of the IT equipment, and then a brightly coloured chart appeared. 'So, as you can see, I have adopted a different presentation model for today. It's called a brain-map-code-o-

graph.' There was a ripple of approving noises from around the room. 'I've taken Daniel's original spreadsheet and collateralised it into an information-hub model,' she paused, 'as you can see?'

Daniel nodded enthusiastically. 'Yes, excellent, Lucy. I had been thinking of using one of those myself but hadn't got around to downloading the software yet with all the deadlines recently.'

There was a flurry of activity by the glass door to the board-room as a young woman, pushing a trolley full of coffees and pastries backed into the room.

'Thank you, ' said Daniel, irritably, 'please set it up in the corner.' There was a clatter of china as the drinks trolley went over the projector cables. 'And *quietly*, if at all possible?'. The young woman looked at him blankly. She was chewing gum and had headphones in her ears. Daniel turned back to Lucy. 'Carry on, please do, Lucy.'

'Thank you, Daniel. So,' she pointed at the central bubble on her chart; 'I've taken Daniel's core indicators; the "now" and "then" of the analysis, if you like;' she glanced round at the group expectantly; an air of taut concentration had filled the room. 'And then,' she pointed to the slightly smaller bubbles connected off to right and left by double-ended arrows, 'I've over-sighted the granular indicators of *risk*, *importance* and *market relevance*.' A few heads nodded sagely. 'You could say I've taken a light-touch to this, but I thought it was important to properly profile the behaviour-functions in terms of the increasing obesity of the markets. I think you'll agree, that Daniel was very wise to include these assessment codes into his initial analysis?'

'Oh yes,' said the Tricorn CEO. 'Very wise in the circumstances.'

A thin man, to Daniel's right; held his hand up tentatively. Lucy beamed and brandished her pointer at him. 'Yes, you have a question?'

'Erm, yes. Lucas Smith, Systems Director.' There was a silence as the man adjusted his glasses and peered down at his notes. 'Can you tell us more about the bubble to the top right? The one labelled *organisational outcome generator*?'

'Ah, I'm glad you asked me that. Although that isn't in the central cortex of the plan, it is still fundamental to the analysis, as Daniel's spreadsheet made clear to me. In order to mobilise a focused approach to our market diversity profiles and ensure value for money; it's important to ensure our indices of progress are aligned to Peverill's strategic vision. Hence the outcome generator.' She stared at Lucas eagerly.

There was a short, breathless silence, and Lucas loosened his tie. 'Yes, yes of course!' he finally conceded. 'Very good idea, Daniel.'

Daniel shrugged and raised his eyebrows. 'Well you know, been in the old business a long-time now Lucas. Nothing gets past me!' Daniel

glanced at her then, and his startled expression reminded her of a fox's face, caught in the sweep of a car's headlights on a dark road.

Lucy turned back to her laptop and tapped through to the next slide. 'So, in summary, a table outlining the embedded culture required to fuel our strategic functions –'

'Excuse me.' The girl's slightly nasal voice caused every head in to turn. No-one had noticed, until now, that she was still in the room. She stood with one hand on the handle of a coffee pot, the other on her hip. Her head-phones had been removed and hung around her neck, and her jaw was moving rhythmically to the chewing of gum. 'Sorry, but what you're saying. It don't make any sense.'

Lucy smiled at the young woman but said nothing in reply. Out of the corner of her eye she could see Daniel shifting in his seat.

'I mean, I know I didn't go to university or nuffink, but I speak English, and this ain't English. What's it mean anyway? What does any of it mean?'

'Ah,' said Lucy, dramatically. 'The million-dollar question. What does any of it mean?'

'It's like,' the girl went on, fitting her words between chews on her gum, 'it's like someone wants to sound clever, but they ain't really. Like they're saying something really important; but really they're saying nuffink at all.'

'Ha ha!' blurted out Daniel, 'very funny. We can serve our own coffees, thank you. No need to stay. These are very complex areas, and we wouldn't expect you to understand.'

Lucy shook her head dramatically. 'But you understand, don't you Daniel?'

'I, yes, yes of course I do.'

The Peverill CEO turned to Daniel. 'Perhaps you should finish off for us then Daniel, summarise?'

She could have stayed, she could have taken perverse pleasure in watching him squirm, but instead, she got up, nodded her goodbyes to the men and left the room. Out in the corridor she noticed the lift door was open. She ran over to catch it and found the coffee girl in there, pinned up against the back wall of the lift by her trolley.

'You made it all up, didn't ya?'

Lucy smiled and nodded.

'Ain't you going to tell them?'

'What's the point, they already know.'

'But if they already know, why are they still there? Why are they still talking?'

Lucy shrugged. 'Because they need to feel that what they do is important?'

'It was like the Emperor's New Clothes.'

'Sorry?'

'Y'know, the fairy story. My gran used to read it to me. This stupid, vain Emperor gets tricked by a con-man into thinkin' he's made him this amazin' new outfit, out of gold thread, and rubies and things; but really he's got nothin' on.'

Lucy laughed. 'I remember that! Everyone goes along with it because they don't want to seem stupid, and then a little boy shouts out that he's naked and suddenly everyone admits it and they jeer at him.'

'So, do you think that's what they're doing now? Taking the piss out of him?'

Lucy shook her head. 'I doubt it. They're all part of the same club. If you show one up, you show them all up.'

'What about you? Will you get fired?'

'I don't know, maybe I could keep going and making things up, and then...?'

The young woman smiled craftily. 'You should try it, see how far you can go?'

Lucy smoothed down her skirt and thought for a moment. 'Maybe I should.'

When the lift hit the ground-floor Lucy got out first so that the young woman could push the trolley out. She smiled. 'It was nice to meet you.'

'And you. Maybe I'll see you soon...if you come back.'

Lucy smiled, then crossed the lobby, pushed through the heavy glass doors and stepped onto the street. She took a deep breath. The city smelt good.



**The Box was just the right size for her
and the child.**

But what would await them when they
opened it?

THE BOX

When the Box arrived it was just the right size for her and the child. It was made out of some kind of dull black material, with a surface that gave the impression of depth, as if you could sink your fingers into it. She stared at it for a while, then decided to look inside. The vacuum seal released with a long hiss; there was a ledge for sitting on, a small light in the centre of the roof, and an air filter with a timer attached. Something chill slipped down her spine. She shut the box with a shudder and threw an old eiderdown over it.

When the child, a climate orphan from the South, had been assigned to her, she had resented it. His dull stare, his obvious sadness, all contributed to the low buzz of shame and powerlessness that she already felt; but she had surprised herself by coming to love him. Ever since her own children had gone to work on The Farms, she had convinced herself that it was best that she faced the end alone. But the child had come, and then the Box; and now she wasn't so sure.

The child was curious about the Box. Over the coming days he asked regularly to see inside it. He would take his small collection of toys in there; pretend it was a spaceship or a time machine. He asked her endless questions about it:

'How does it work?'

'I'm not quite sure. It's something to do with Quantum Mechanics.'

'What's Quantum Mechanics?'

'It's the science that studies the behaviour of all the tiny things that make the universe.'

'What tiny things?'

'Well, like photons, atoms, that kind of thing...I think.'

'Is the box made of...*fotonns* and *attoms*?'

'Everything is.'

'Even me?'

'Even you.'

The boy giggled.

And then the day came. Box day. She gathered the child's toys and opened the door. 'We need to start the filter first.' She reached inside the box and tapped 'initiate' on the touch screen then stepped back out. The boy's fingers fluttered then came down to stroke one of the dark faces of the box. 'Will it work?'

'I don't know. Nobody really knows.'

'Don't the experts know?'

She shook her head. Most of her adult life she had heard politicians and business people deride the experts; but as soon as it became obvious that it was too late to stop The Disaster, the scientists, the mechanics, the engineers, became gods. And when they said even they couldn't stop it, they were joined by the Philosophers, the experimental theorists; and from all of this *expertise*, came The Box.

She heard a ping, looked inside, and saw that the status light had gone to green.

'It's time.'

She took hold of his hand and they stepped in. She settled him on the ledge then leant forward to shut the door behind them. It closed with a hiss like a slowly released breath. Her heart thudded in her chest.

'What does it do?'

'It... ' she struggled to calm the tremor in her voice. 'It seals us off completely from the world outside; no light, no sound, nothing. And it gives us air for ten minutes.'

He held her hand a little tighter. 'And how will that work?'

'It's hard to explain. Did you ever hear about Schroedinger's Cat?'

He shook his head.

'Ok, what if a tree falls in a forest and there's no living thing around. Does it still make a sound?'

He screwed his face up tight and peered at her.

'You see, the experts thought that maybe, just maybe, if no human on earth is able to witness The Disaster, because they are in their boxes, it might not happen at all.' She knew it sounded crazy, her fraying hopes lay instead with the Many World theorists. They hypothesised that at the point at which The Disaster happened, the world may duplicate, and from the safety of their boxes, some people would find themselves in the world where the disaster hadn't happened, the unlucky ones in the world where it had.

The ping repeated and the status light moved to orange. The screen beside it read 'one minute.' Without expecting it, a sob escaped her and she brought her free hand up to her mouth.

'What's the matter?'

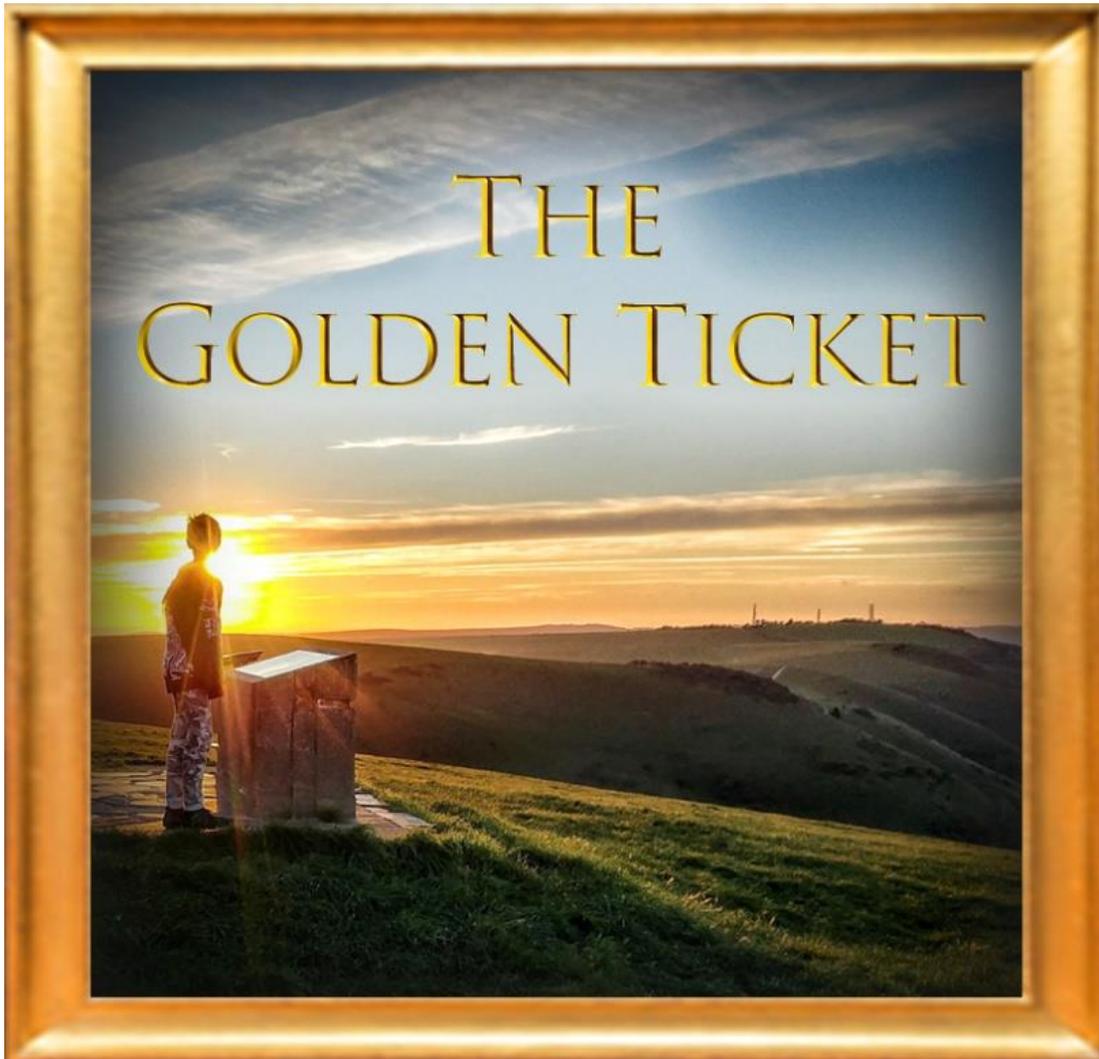
'I was just thinking...of my children...if they're...'

A third ping and the light changed to red. The screen now displayed the message 'exit.'

'Don't worry,' said the child, smiling up at her, 'it must be ok, coz we're still here.'

She put her arm around him. She couldn't bring herself to tell him that their reality only truly existed while the Box was still closed. She couldn't bring herself to tell him about their insurance policy; two government issue pills in her pocket, guaranteed to work in seconds and be entirely painless.

She took a deep breath and reached for the door.



**People keep telling Ben he's so lucky to have
won a Golden Ticket.**

So why does it feel like his world is falling
apart?

THE GOLDEN TICKET

‘It’s like that old film,’ said Ben’s dad, ‘the one Granddad always used to go on about.’

Ben remembered the film. There were funny little people in it, and lots and lots of chocolate.

‘They won a Golden Ticket, remember?’ Ben had known something was wrong right then. If the Golden Ticket was so brilliant, why was dad crying?

The bus trundled on. At least it was cool in there. Ben felt hot inside. Like his eyes and his brain were burning. He leant his head against the glass. Yellow fields slid by, blue sky, dark shapes of trees. If he squeezed his eyes shut a little they became three dancing stripes of colour. He had done that with the sun once, dared himself to look at it directly through a tiny gap between his eyelids. His vision had been wrong for ages afterwards, little dancing blobs of black, and the scorched shadow of the shape of the window frame. It was a whole day before he dared to own up to his mum and she had been so angry with him he never did it again. At the time her fury had upset him, he’d told her she was mean. How could she be like that when he had hurt his eyes, spent a whole day worrying that he would never see properly again? He had wanted a cuddle, not to be shouted at. Now though, sat on the bus, the golden ticket in his pocket, he had a flash of understanding. He understood now that she had been like that because she loved him so very much, and the realisation hurt him in a way that made him want to curl up in his seat with shame.

‘Hello children.’ There was a pretty young woman at the front of the bus. She was wearing a yellow uniform and speaking into a little microphone. ‘We are now 15 miles from Manchester and not far from our destination. Now I know that some of you must be feeling very strange,’ her voice dropped and she pulled her eyebrows together, wrinkling up her smooth forehead, ‘but although I know I can’t make that feeling go away, I can at least try to reassure you. You are very lucky. You are going to a beautiful place and there are many people there who are waiting to look after you. Some of them you may even know. Oops, excuse me a moment.’ The microphone clicked off and the bus came to a stop. Ben craned forward in his seat. There was an old man stood in the middle of the empty road dressed in an assortment of ragged clothes. The lady got out and went to talk to him. She kept her

voice gentle and low but the old man was gesticulating wildly and had started to shout.

'You know nothing girl! You've barely lived! Don't you tell me where I should go; you know nothing of where I should go! There's whole worlds in me girl, whole universes. There's the nits in my hair, and the lice in my clothes, they're happy, all happy and they aren't hungry or thirsty, I am everything to them.'

Ben watched the bus guide, bright in her canary-yellow uniform next to the bedraggled old man, continue to try to talk to him. After a few seconds, though, she gave up, shrugging her shoulders then hopping back on to the bus. As the doors closed she whispered to the driver. He turned the steering wheel to full lock and started to inch the bus over on to the right-hand lane (Ben had wondered why he'd bothered sticking to one side of the road anyway, he couldn't remember when he'd last seen a car, at least one that was moving). The old man refused to move, facing southwards on the dusty road, arms limp at his side, oblivious to the coach full of staring children. Ben studied him as they crawled past. His hair and beard were matted together, the jacket he was wearing greasy and shapeless. Ben knew they weren't supposed to feel sorry for the old people; it was their fault after all that this was happening. But he couldn't help it. He couldn't believe that this old man was to blame; was the reason he was on this bus today. His instincts told him it must be the fault of someone bigger, or richer or more powerful than this pitiful figure.

'Sorry about that children. He was a bit lost and asking for directions. Now where were we?' Ben remembered when the man had come to the door with his ticket. At first his parents had refused to let him in, his mum had started crying before he had even put his hand in his pocket to get it, slid to the floor, right there and then in the hall. Dad had to half-carry her to the sofa, she was shouting, and wailing. Ben and his brother had gone and sat on the stairs, he on the second from bottom step, his brother on the second from top, long gangly legs folded so that his knees came up to his chin. The voice of the man in yellow never seemed to change, low and relentless; they only caught snatches of what he was saying: 'You know this is the only way...governments across the world...'

His mum had screamed then, 'Governments! Fuck the Governments! Who caused this? Who? You tell me that! And now you want to take away my child!'

'I understand your anger but...a great opportunity for us all...a future...'
His brother had come down then and put his arm around him. It had felt like they were falling away from the world, out into space, weightless.

They were passing a lake now, a little greenery crowded lovingly around the last few feet of water. A small house stood lonely, casting a long

shadow onto the field behind it as the sun started to set. Could it really all go? God with his giant hand, sweeping mankind and its mess away like crumbs off a table-top. Just like that? Maybe if there was a God, he was bored and fed up with people. Maybe if there was a God, he was bored and fed up with Ben too.

'Isn't that a lovely sight children?' Their host was smiling broadly and gesturing towards the window. 'There's a beautiful lake where we are going too, just one of very many great things and places for you to play and learn. Now I know you are going to miss your parents terribly. Some of you must think that the tickets are unfair, cruel even. Why is it that some children have been able to come with their mum or dad or sister, but not you? It does feel unfair, but believe me children, the cleverest people from all over the world have thought about this for many years, and they worked out that the luck of the draw, was the only way. Right now you must feel like you are very *unlucky*, but with time you will come to realise that you are the most fortunate children in the world.' She surveyed the silent faces in front of her, eyebrows raised. She was pretty, but, Ben decided she was definitely also a bit stupid.

Ben's mind drifted. Everything inside felt wrong and he wanted to switch off his brain. It didn't help that someone was crying behind him. To distract himself he turned around and peeked between the seats to see who it was. It was a girl about his own age, he recognised her straight away.

'You live on my street don't you?'

She struggled to answer, tears streaming down her cheeks.

'Yes...number...22.'

'Your mum and dad didn't get picked either?'

'No. Can I sit with you?'

'Yeh, all right.'

She scrambled out of her seat, clutching her small bag tightly to her chest. She sat next to him, close, and took hold of his hand. He would have rather picked up a rattlesnake than have a girl take hold of his hand in his old life, but right now the warmth and firmness of it made him feel a bit calmer. He might never let go of it, if she would let him.

The girl's sobs started to lessen and she took a deep trembling breath. 'Apparently...there's sheep there.' she said, just above a whisper, 'They go wherever they like and people can have them as pets.'

'I've never seen a sheep. My Grandma said lamb was her favourite meat though.'

'I can't believe they ate them, it's so mean. They're so soft and friendly. I bet they don't let people eat them *there*.'

'Children, children!' Their guide had sprung up out of her seat, she was bouncing with excitement. 'You can see it! Straight ahead! Isn't it

beautiful?!' They stood up in their seats, Ben strained to look, pushing his tightening stomach hard against the headrest of the chair in front. Every child on the bus was doing the same, some nudging each other and whispering, others transported deep into some private place, mute with fear and wonder. Three huge craft filled the field in front of them, dwarfing the convoy of buses that was pulling up beside them.

'What do you think's going to happen?' He was trembling. 'To everyone back home?'

The girl looked at him and shook her head. It was such a sunny day; everything ahead of them was on fire with light. The girl squinted against the brightness of it.

'I don't know. I used to wish things, but I don't anymore.'

They came to a stop, and a stream of people in yellow uniforms surrounded the bus, smiling up at the astonished faces of the children. The door opened and Ben willed himself away from his seat and into the corridor. He pulled the girl gently after him, still holding tightly onto her hand.

'Come on then, we'd better go.'



**What really lies beneath our green and
pleasant land?**

Local journalist, Richard Loach, is about to learn the shocking truth, when he visits National Drill's latest fracking site.

FRACKING HELL!

The newly laid tarmac road was smooth; snaking darkly ahead of them in the morning sunlight. The big Land Rover was almost soundless, adding to Simon's sense of unease and inadequacy. He was just a jobbing journalist for a local newspaper, why had he been invited into the vast, moneyed, corporate world of National Drill?

The driver shifted the car down into second gear. 'We're nearly there.'

Simon looked ahead and felt underwhelmed. He wasn't sure what he'd expected, maybe something like the oil fields in the title-sequence of Dallas, or chimneys belching smoke; either way he hadn't expected this. Considering the controversy surrounding the Fracking site, the debates in parliament, the flurry of petitions and new protest groups; visually at least, it looked unimportant.

Their journey ended at an eight-foot-high chain-link fence with a small security booth behind it. As they drew up he saw a low pre-fab building to the right and a concreted area with a couple of tankers parked on it.

The driver stopped and turned to him. 'Have you got your ID?'

Simon nodded and fumbled in his pocket for his East Sussex Herald staff card. A man in a hard hat and high-vis appeared beside him and poked a calloused hand through his window. Simon passed his ID over and smiled; underneath the relentless sun the man's face was almost entirely lost in the shadow cast by his hard-hat.

He handed the card back to Simon. 'Please follow me.'

Simon grabbed his bag and thanked the driver. He'd forgotten how high off the ground the Land Rover was and tripped as he got out of it, knocking his knees painfully on the tarmac.

The security guard watched him impassively. 'Careful.'

Simon stood up and brushed off his jeans. 'Yes, sorry. I'm ok.'

They set off at a brisk pace towards the pre-fab he had spotted from the other side of the gate. The site was busy with a number of burly men, who bared little resemblance to the young, smiling blonde woman that National Drill had put on the home page of their website. His guide opened the door to the pre-fab and left him there. When his eyes had adjusted to the relative gloom, Simon saw a tall, tanned, pot-bellied man, who was smiling widely, revealing a row of perfect polar-white teeth. He strode over and held out his hand.

'Mr Loach, it's a pleasure to meet you!' The man's voice was loud and American. Simon took his hand and endured a knuckle-crushingly

enthusiastic shake. 'I'm Brad Colby, East *Sus-sex* area manager for National Drill.' Brad pronounced *Sus-sex* as if it was a newly coined form of gender-identity.

Simon suppressed a smile. 'A pleasure to meet you Mr Colby and thank you for inviting me.'

Brad gestured to his left and for the first time Simon noticed there was someone else in the room, a nervous looking skinny young man virtually hidden behind a large PC monitor. 'This is Richard Edwards, our Geo-surveyor for the Ashfield site.'

The young man got up from his desk and shook Simon's hand considerably more limply than his boss had done.

'Before we go for the drill field tour I thought you might like to find out more about what National Drill is doing down here in East *Sus-sex*!' He picked up a remote-control and gestured towards a large flat screen TV in the corner, then seemed to think better of it and put it down again. 'Hey, Simon, you must be mighty thirsty on such a hot day. Bet you'd like a drink first!' In a strangely showy way Brad went over to a small sink and poured two glasses of water. One he drank instantly, smacking his lips and sighing as he replaced the empty glass on the drainer; the other he brought over to Simon. For a moment Simon was non-plussed; but then it dawned on him; *nothing to see here* Brad was trying to say, like that Tory MP who forced his kid to eat a burger during the Mad Cow disease scare in the nineties. Simon sniffed at the water then took a sip. It tasted fine.

Brad smiled and picked up the remote control again. 'I don't know how much you know about Fracking?'

'Well -' Simon had been about to mention the You Tube video he'd seen from Nebraska where a lady who lived near a Fracking site had started to pull yellow water laced with arsenic from her well; the fact that the United States Geological Survey had confirmed that injecting pressurised fluids into the ground was inducing earthquakes in many US States; let alone the fact that if large amounts of methane were accidentally released into the atmosphere it could trigger an extinction-level event; but Brad cut across him; closing his eyes and raising his hand - palm out towards Simon, as if hushing a querulous child.

'Now, Simon, you look like an intelligent man to me, so let's cut the crap and stick to the facts. This is a much-maligned industry.' Brad hoiked his belt up his prodigious belly; a pointless exercise as far as Simon could see as it merely sank again the instant it was released. '*National Drill* acknowledges that mistakes were made in the early days - but we've come a long way from there. We're now one of the most highly regulated industries in *The World*, and we're giving your community £100,000, yep, you heard me right: *£100,000!* Now think

what you could do with that kinda money!' He raised his eyebrows at Simon.

'I'm sure a lot of good things could be done, but it doesn't take away from some very significant concerns -'

Brad silenced him again. 'I brought you here Simon so you could tell people the facts in your newspaper. So here's a little video that will tell you everything you need to know.'

Ten minutes later they emerged from the pre-fab, blinking against the hot white-light outside, and Simon's scalp instantly started to sweat under his hard-hat. Brad (now sporting a pair of mirrored Ray Bans) stopped for a second to talk to one of the operatives. When he'd finished he laid a meaty hand on Simon's shoulder. 'You ready to meet our lady?'

The drill was about the height of two men and set in the middle of a grassy field. It was surrounded by a metal cage, about eight-feet square and the whole thing was silent; no oiled pumping cogs, no plethora of pipes or machinery. Whatever the the drill was doing, it was doing it quietly and discreetly.

Brad beamed at him. 'Don't look like much, does it? But let me tell you, this baby is drilling six thousand feet deep - that's twelve times the height of your crazy i360 they got down there in Brighton! From the natural gas she's releasin' we can make a Mega Watt of e-lectricity for East *Sus-sex* every day!'

Simon cleared his throat. 'What about safety?'

'I'm mighty glad you asked me that.' Brad came up close to him and crossed his arms against the barrel of his chest. 'We have no less than eighty seismic activity readers in this field and we operate a traffic light system - green means AOK, Yella' means reduce the pressure and red means suspend the fracturing. You're as safe here as you were when you was a little boy sat on yer Mamma's knee.'

Simon pointed towards the drill, feeling a bit foolish. 'That's not the traffic light thing is it? Just asking because the light's orange.'

A lot of things happened at once. The tan leaked away from Brad's face, several men rushed over towards the drill and Simon felt a tremor - slight but unmistakable - beneath his feet. A number of workers - a fluorescent blur in their yellow high-vis - had opened the drill cage and were frantically adjusting things and attempting to turn a large wheel, which appeared to be stuck.

There was another tremor, greater this time, and a cloud of crows burst from a nearby tree and launched noisily into the sky. The light by the drill had moved to red. Brad ran towards it screaming - 'Suspend the frack! SUSPEND THE FRACK!'

One of the men shouted back at him. 'We have! But it's not making any difference.'

There was a boom, muted but powerful - and the ground in front of the drill suddenly split, revealing an open wound of dark soil. The turf moved in waves then suddenly erupted, knocking the men forward. Another boom, another crack and the drill shuddered then keened sideways, falling to the earth with a thud like a felled tree.

As if it was a ripe fruit opening up to reveal its inner flesh, the ground underneath the drill swelled then split at the core. The centre continued to erupt, creating a dark flower of spilled soil and rocks. Simon watched, immobilised with fascination and terror; Brad stood a few feet away from him, his jaw hanging open. Still the mound of earth pushed upward, the ground trembling against the power of deep and constant movement.

Simon wondered if a giant boulder had been pushed up by the pressure of the drilling, but then a man screamed. At first Simon couldn't catch what he said, but then it was clearer: 'There's hair, it's got hair!' His glance went from the man, who was now running away then back to the mound. It appeared to be covered in a mane of thick, muddy dark hair, the strands as thick as ropes. There was another huge tremor, almost knocking Simon off his feet, and the mound moved again - this time in a considered and sinuous way. It changed shape, elongating and un-ravelling what seemed, impossibly, to be limbs; huge and muscled, as dark and rough as tree-bark.

A figure, the size of a house, straightened itself, facing away from them. On its back there was a wound, oozing a thick rust-brown liquid. Behind Simon someone started screaming, it took him a moment to realise that it was Brad. The figure turned slowly, the earth rolling beneath its feet. Simon could barely breathe, his heart was beating so fast. When it had turned fully, Simon saw, with an utterly overwhelming feeling of something profound and terrible, that it was like a woman. Huge heavy breasts covered with veins as big as tree roots, hung from beneath the muddy curtain of hair. Its stomach was rounded, the legs short and heavy with dark elephantine flesh. It swung its head towards them as if sniffing something out.

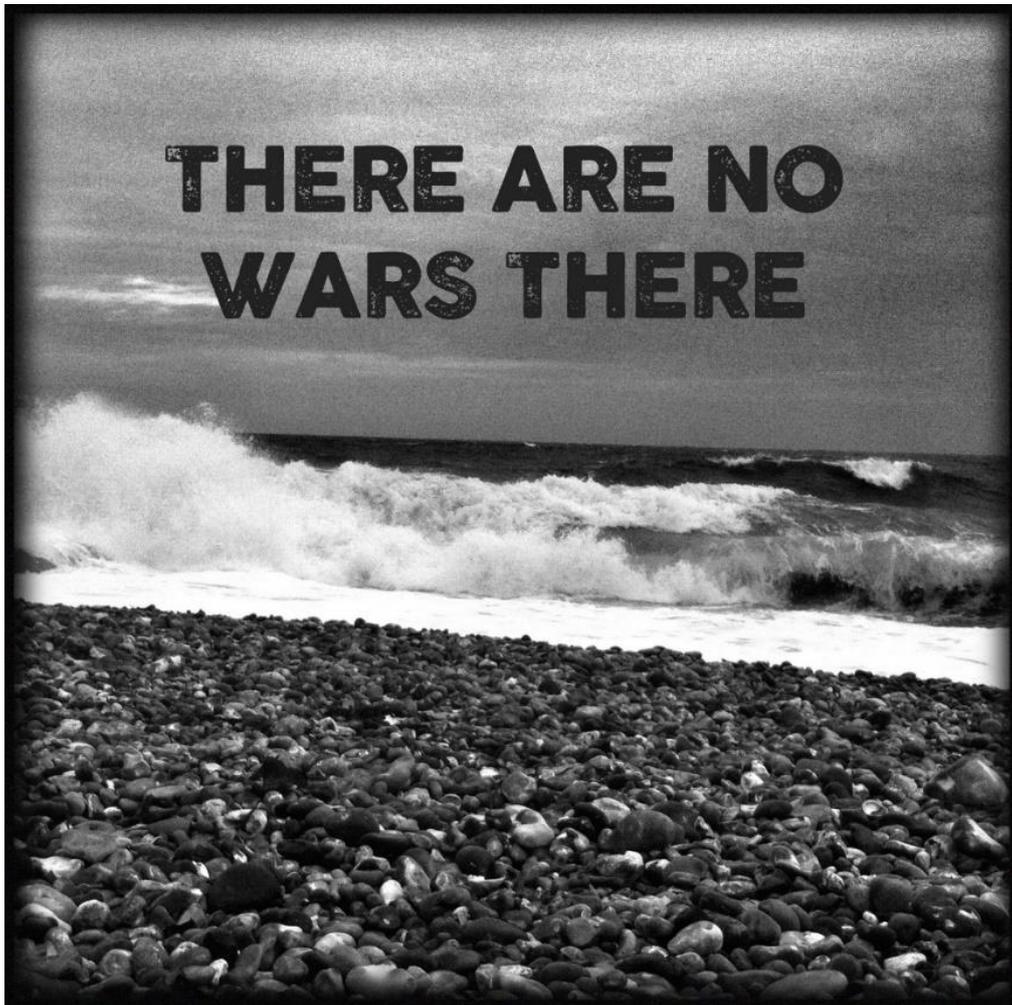
It started to advance, Brad's screams sharpened. After a few steps, it stopped and squatted, bringing its face closer to the ground. A hand, the size of a car, came up and parted the oily mane of hair. The creature's eyes focussed in on Simon, her huge iris' like a pair golden moons, presented a glinting galactic depth that he wanted to fall into. As he looked back at her, he realised the profound feeling that had overwhelmed him earlier was of one of sorrow and rage.

Suddenly she moved her attention away from him and towards Brad, who was still screaming. With a casual movement the giant creature swept her hand along the grass, brushing Brad and the rest of the crew away and sending them hurtling like exploded skittles across the field.

Their bodies landed in strange and terrible angles against the fence and across the road.

With another huge, earth-ripping movement she turned and bounded through the perimeter fence, flattening it as if it was a piece of paper. Simon watched her crash through a line of trees and disappear behind the curve of some distant fields.

The next morning above a drone photograph of white tents and torn-up earth the headline reads: 'FRACKING HELL! The True story behind the Ashfield Disaster, by sole survivor Richard Loach'.



**The boat is her last hope of escape. But
they're heading for a storm.**

THERE ARE NO WARS THERE

Sara comes out of her dream with a jolt, as if she has just broken the surface of deep water. She can feel Adil's reassuring weight against her chest. She keeps her eyes closed and listens; people are talking, their voices soft alongside the sound of the waves lapping against the side of the boat.

'...when you were in the garden you could hear the children playing in the school yard. Such a nice sound, laughter, and screaming – but happy screaming, you know, not like...'

'I had planted so much this year: tomatoes, onions, carrots, peppers...'

A third voice joins in, barely above a whisper. 'I wonder if our gardens are even there anymore.'

Sara keeps her eyes closed, trying to imagine that she has just fallen asleep on a chair at home; that any moment now she must get up and head to the kitchen to make dinner. She might even need to walk the dog and go to the market to get a few things. But however hard she tries she cannot maintain the conceit. She knows full well that the chair, the kitchen, the market are gone; the dog, too, caught by a bit of shrapnel. They hadn't even had time to bury him. Her home is now a burnt-out shell, the streets ruptured and blasted beyond all recognition.

Like every morning now she wakes to a feeling of crushing despair. The *things she cannot bear to think about* crowd her thoughts. What has happened to her husband? Did he make it to the beach in time to get on a boat? She heard the boss-man say that they only had enough water for one more day, what if they run out? What if Adil doesn't make it? And worse, what if *she* doesn't make it? Who will look after him then? She decides she must pick someone in the boat, and ask them to take Adil if she dies.

She opens her eyes a fraction and looks around at the other people on the boat. There are fifteen of them as well as her and Adil. Quiet eruptions of conversation start up but as quickly recede again. Everyone is as desperate and lost as she is. Can she trust any of them? Fear has spread across her country like a disease, and people react in different ways. Some keep their humanity, and will still help you. Others became cruel and calculating; survival the only engine that drives them now.

Her eyes settle on a middle-aged couple near the front of the boat. She knows them, they used to live on the same road as her, and they had a son, who died in the civil war. If they'd known loss, hopefully they could feel compassion too?

She feels Adil stir and forces her eyes open and looks at him. His little head is nestled in the crook of her arm and his forehead is jewelled with sweat. His eyelids flutter then open. His big dark eyes search blearily, as if looking for something they recognise, then they find her face and settle. There's no reproach in his gaze, but she can't help but feel it. *I didn't ask to be born into this; his eyes say to her. I didn't ask to suffer so much.* She reaches deep inside of herself and pulls out a smile.

'Good morning little one.'

'Mama, I'm hungry.'

'I know.'

'Mama I'm thirsty.'

'We'll get you some water in a bit.'

'Mama, where's Papa?'

'We'll find him soon.'

'Mama, will people be kind where we're going?'

'Yes, of course.'

'How do you know?'

'Because they are rich and there are no wars there.'

'You promise?'

'I promise.'

Sara guesses that it's the middle of the afternoon because the sun is high in the sky, and the shadow of the mast has become little more than a pencil-line of darkness against the pale wood of the boat's floor. Some kind of large sea bird flies overhead, its cry piercing the hot silence. For a moment Sara's mind soars with it, if only she and Adil were birds, they could simply rise up from the boat and escape this horror, it would be so simple.

'Here, it is time for water.'

Sara looks up and squints against the sun. The boss-man is standing above her, his face glossy with sweat.

'You can have one gulp, the boy can have two.' He thrusts the bottle towards her and she takes it.

'Thank you so much.' She tips the bottle back and the water feels like liquid gold as it travels down her raw dry throat. She passes it to Adil, her hand hovers by the bottom, ready to snatch it away if he tries to take too much, but he doesn't. As he drinks he looks cautiously down the length of the bottle at the boss-man's inscrutable face.

When Adil has finished the boss-man takes the bottle and moves over to a sleeping old woman. 'Water, time for water.' She doesn't respond. He shakes her and her body moves limply as if she's a doll. He grunts and puts down the bottle, pushes her headscarf back from her face then prises the old woman's eyes open and peers in.

Sara instinctively pulls Adil's face against her chest.

The boss-man stands up and looks round. 'She's dead.' He picks her up as easily as if she was a child and tips her unceremoniously over the side of the boat. Sara cries out as she hears the body hit the water. Adil squirms slightly but she just holds him tighter.

A young man gets up unsteadily against the rocking of the boat. 'She was a doctor.' His voice trails off. 'She used to look after me when I was a child.' He sits down again, his forehead is deeply creased as if he is trying to understand something that keeps eluding him.

Adil finally manages to get free of her grip and before she can stop him he is at the side of the boat and looking over. He comes back to her and climbs onto her lap. 'She's gone now.' He says quietly.

If only the pain got less, if only there was some kind of numbing over time; but the skin has been removed from Sara's emotions and now the slightest touch sends her nerves screaming.

The boss-man moves back up the boat, throwing cereal bars into their laps as he goes. 'Eat now, and then sleep. Tomorrow we will be there.'

The world is pitch-black and full of screaming. It plummets and lurches and tips; flinging stinging water into her face and down her throat; slamming bodies against her then tossing them away. They are in the heart of a vortex of howling wind and all she is aware of is hanging on; of the small body gripping her tightly, fingers grabbing at the soaking mess of her clothes – of her own arm clamped around the solidity of the mast, her other tight against the jut of Adil's ribs. Time and space have lost all meaning; they are reduced to atoms, crashing around in desperate nothingness.

It takes Sara a while to understand that she is still alive. She can feel the warmth of the sun on her face and there are new aches and sore areas that define the boundaries of her body. She can hear groaning and whimpering. A surge of adrenalin flings her into full consciousness with a cry.

'Adil! Where are you Adil?!'

'Mama.' She feels a small hand on her ankle.

She falls to the floor of the boat and scoops him up. 'Adil, thank God!'

He cries out when she touches him. 'It hurts Mama!'

She looks down and sees the blood oozing from a deep gash on his thigh. She tears some of the ragged sail away from the broken mast and bandages his wound. She looks up and sees the boss-man peering keenly at the horizon.

'Are we still on course?'

He looks around at her, his expression stony. 'I do not know. I lost the sat-nav in the storm. We have a little fuel left but I must save it till the end to get to shore.'

Panic tightens around her, she feels the urgent need to be sick but knows there's nothing inside her to reject. What if they are now heading out into the wasteland of the Atlantic? Can she stand to watch her son die? Maybe it would be kinder to simply go over the side with him and join the old lady in the dark water.

'Land! I see land!'

Sara looks up. The young man is bobbing up and down and gesturing wildly. Suddenly, all the people that she thought had been reduced to bodies, start to stir. Their eyes are bright with expectation in their skinny sun-burned faces.

What had just been a hazy line on the horizon has now become recognisable as a long line of beach crowned by a distant dark mountain range. As they get closer Sara sees sand-dunes and feathery-topped palm trees. There are even some people on the beach. Hope and relief blooms out of her heart, leaving her breathless.

Everyone moves towards the bow of the boat to get a better look. The boss-man starts up the engine and the boat lurches towards the shore, Sara can feel the vibration of the engine through the soles of her bare feet. Adil holds her hand tightly, his fingers judder occasionally, she guesses through pain. She looks down at him and strokes his hair and he leans against her hip.

They're close enough now that Sara can make out the figures on the beach. They are in dark uniforms, their chests crossed with rifle straps. Behind the sand dunes too, she can see a high barbed-wire fence. Her heart shrinks.

As the boat grounds itself on the beach the soldiers stride into the water and surround them. The couple that used to live on the same road as her immediately move forward, the boss watches, impassive and narrow eyed.

The man steps nearer to the soldiers, smiles and gestures placatingly. 'My name is David Hunter, and this is my wife Joan. We are from a town called Yarmouth and we have travelled a very long way. I can't tell you how happy we are to finally be here -'

'Step back!' One of the soldiers lifts his rifle and points it at David. 'You cannot get off your boat. We don't want you English pigs here, you come over in your thousands, like cockroaches. This is our country.'

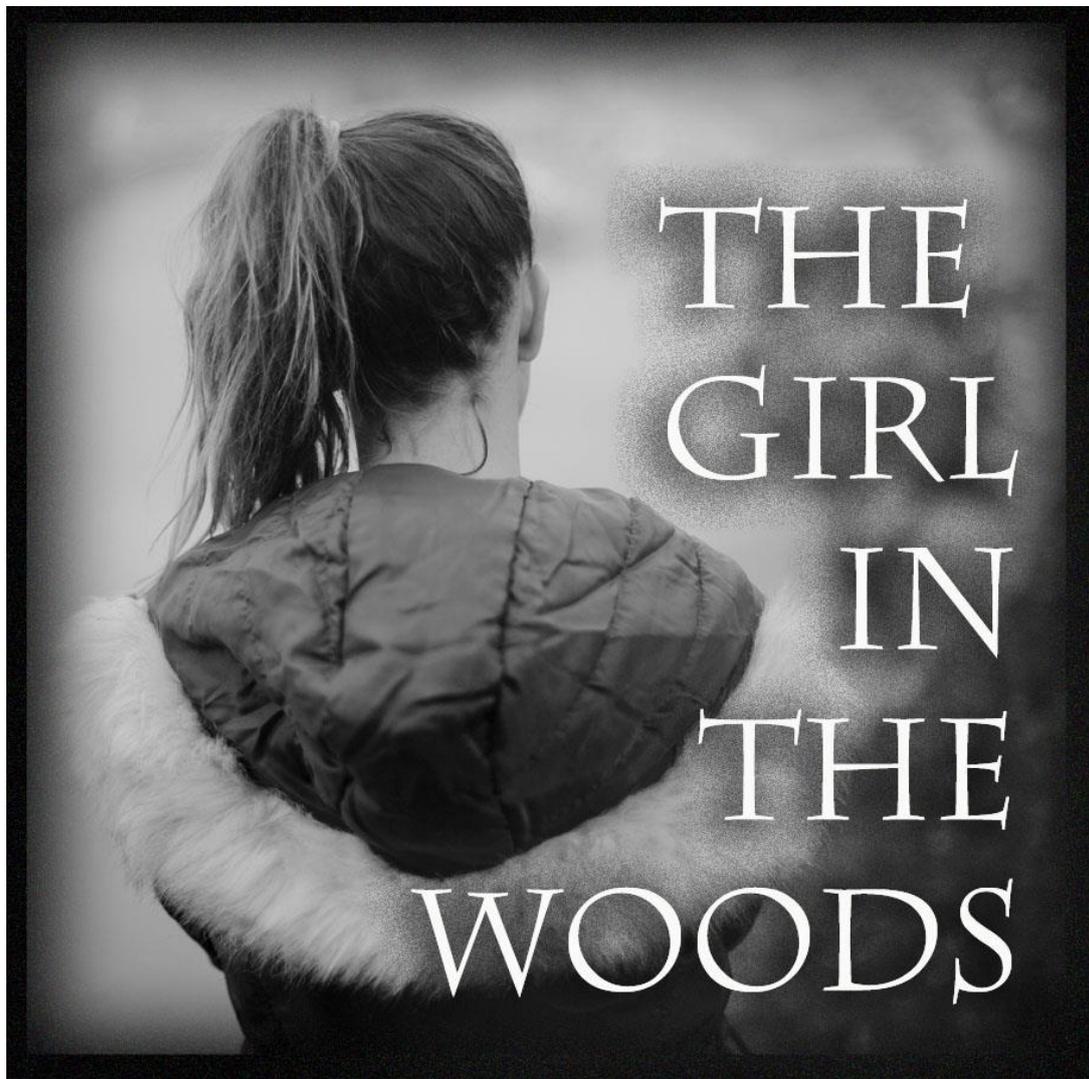
The colour has drained from David's face. He reaches back for his wife's hand, she takes it and steps beside him. 'Please, you don't understand. We've lost everything, our home, our friends and family. We have nothing!'

The soldier spits into the sea. 'Your war is not our problem. You cannot look after your own country, you think we will let you into ours?' Two of the soldiers move forward and start to push the boat back into

the water. Another throws bottles of water and bits of food into the boat. All the while the first soldier keeps his gun pointed at them.

Sara's heart is pounding and words tumble out of her mouth, she is almost screaming: 'I had a house, a garden, a job. In just a few years, it's gone. All gone. Please, you don't understand!' The soldiers don't look up and keep pushing at the boat, shoving it out. She picks up Adil and thrusts him towards them. 'My son, please, look, he is hurt! Please help us!'

The boat is suddenly buoyant again, the movement throws Sara backwards and Adil falls on to her with a cry. 'Please!' she struggles to get up, 'I had a house, I had a garden I...' But the soldiers aren't listening and have already turned and started to make their way back up the beach.



Where do you go when the one person who is supposed to keep you safe is the one you need to run from?

THE GIRL IN THE WOODS

The bramble catches in her hair, making her cry out. She stops and backs up, turns her head so she can see to untangle it. It's a tall, vicious plant, grown high and contorted through a Hawthorn tree, to get to the light above the forest floor. She tugs at her hair, tries to detach it from the stem but its thorns keep sticking into her fingers and making her eyes water.

She drags the arm of her cardigan down over her hand to protect her skin, and pulls hard on the bramble again. This time, after a few seconds she is finally free. She looks back to see several strands of her hair hanging from the sharp finger of bramble, and it makes her stomach tighten with nausea. She thinks of the dusty sweepings of a hairdresser's floor, the unpleasant tangle of hair in the shower plug, the dull mat pulled out of a hairbrush; they all seem to speak of death and people's ultimate temporariness.

She goes on into the trees; fallen leaves and rusty bracken fronds crunch under her trainers and release a pleasant, earthy smell. It's so peaceful here, there's no wind, and the air is mild. She falls into a comfortable pace, enjoying the movement of her legs, the sensation of breathing the clean air deep into her lungs. Her boyfriend, Dom, brought her here for the first time a few months ago; he said it would be good for them to get out of the city. He was right, she'd come away feeling clean and peaceful for the first time in years; and that's why she's come here today, to be somewhere clean and peaceful to say her goodbyes. And then, it's time to move on.

The trees feel benign and watchful, she touches their trunks as she walks past as if they are old friends. There are huge old Elms, their bark pitted and rough, branches twisted and powerful as muscled arms; and slender silver birch's, their trunks gleaming white like bone and their leaves tattered and turning to gold. If you take a step back, she realises, trees are improbable and crazy things, springing up so huge and gnarled out of our parks and pavements. If aliens landed on earth, trees would probably be the thing they found most exotic.

She could quite easily just keep on walking. She wonders how long she could go before finding a road or farmer's field. There's something beguiling about the idea, of just walking, but she knows she must stop soon. She needs to find the right place, she needs to do what she came here to do.

She keeps seeing places but then discounting them: the ground not flat enough, too over-hung, or too dense with foliage. As she walks she

starts to feel afraid. She wishes Dom could be with her, she wishes she didn't have to hurt him, to hurt any of the people she loves; but she knows that it has fallen to her, to go on alone and take all the shame and sadness with her.

She steps over a fallen tree, looks up, and instantly knows she has found the perfect place: the ground is flat and clear, the canopy of the trees is thinner and dappled light patterns the ground with luminous lace.

She sits down on the fallen tree and takes off her rucksack. Suddenly business-like she takes several things out of the front pocket: her phone and battery; a bottle of water; and a sweet tin, which she knows contains six small white pills. She takes a deep breath and puts the battery back into her phone. After a few moments the screen lights up and it pings continuously for about ten seconds as a series of voicemails and texts appear on the screen. Most are from Dom and her mum; she can't bring herself to read them. There's only one person she needs to contact right now, and it's not her mum, or Dom. She opens up a new message and types:

Hi Siân, I'm just letting you know that I'm going now, and I wanted to say goodbye. I'm sorry, I know how much you'd hoped that I could go to court, but I really can't. I feel like I've failed you, but I just don't have the strength to face him in that way. You may find it hard to believe this but you really have helped me. You're the only person I've ever told, and when I did it was like taking a great weight off my shoulders. And you made me realise that it wasn't my fault, and that has meant a lot. But I'm so tired, Siân, so tired of carrying the heaviness and the pain of it. I can't do it anymore, I need to go and find somewhere I can put the weight down and I can only think of one place. I've sent letters to mum and Dom but I haven't told them what he did to me, and I don't want you to. Thank you for being my best friend. Love Zoe xxxx

She fights back the urge to cry, her breath coming shallow and fast. She sends the message, double-checks it's gone then takes the battery back out of the phone and throws them both haphazardly across the clearing.

She drinks from her water bottle then opens the little tin and takes each of the pills out and lays them on a big sycamore leaf by her feet. She stares at them and thinks again of Dom and for a second she wavers, but she's doing this for him as much as anyone. She's setting him free. Resolutely she picks up each pill and swallows them one after the other with a big gulp of water; then, shakily, she gets to her feet and moves to the middle of the clearing.

She opens her rucksack and takes out a blanket. She shakes it open and lays it on the ground, then puts the rucksack at the top. She lies down, puts her head onto the rucksack and looks up. The light blinds her for a moment, but then her eyes adjust, and she sees the delicate fingers of the birches stroking the white sky.

She closes her eyes, imagines the pills inside her, her stomach acid slowly dissolving them, the essence of them hitting her blood stream. Her mind wanders into dark places. She remembers the first time *he* touched her in that wrong way. She was at Melanie's sixth birthday party at the local swimming pool; they had played in the water for over an hour, then had finally, reluctantly, got out for the birthday dinner, their swimming costumes slick as Dolphin skin. He had come over to dry her and when he had, his hand had lingered between her legs, and it hadn't felt right, and she'd felt sick, but convinced herself he hadn't meant to do it.

But then, just a week later, she'd been looking out of her bedroom window one night, watching a brightly-lit train snake along the track to Highbury below her like a deep-sea electric fish; and he'd come into her room. After that, there was no question that he had meant to do it, and he'd gone on doing it until she'd turned sixteen. And all those years too, in her tiny bedroom, listening to her mother whimpering through the wall, probably trying not to cry out and wake the children; thinking she was protecting them, taking the pain herself, but not knowing; never imagining; what her husband was doing to his own daughter most nights before he got into bed next to her.

Is this why she had never told her mum, because she hadn't wanted to add to the misery and failure she knew she already felt? She worked herself to the bone trying to make some kind of a life for Zoe and her brother, taking her dad's insults and jibes with a silent stoicism that made Zoe want to hurt herself. And sometimes she would; sneaking up to her room and gouging lines in her arms with an old math's compass.

And Zoe has always known that her mum will never leave him, whatever he does. It is a kind of madness that seems impossible to fight because there is nothing you can take hold of about it; no rationality, no sense, just despair.

She opens her eyes and hot tears run down the sides of her face and onto the blanket. She thinks the pills must have started to work, her limbs feel heavy while her face and her mind are light and buoyant. She takes a long slow breath and tries to analyse what she's feeling. There's some fear, some trepidation in the face of the unknown. There's some sadness too, particularly for Dom. He really does love her, and that is something amazing and beautiful. But he doesn't know the deep dark places that parts of her live in, and she never wants him to. Better for him to think of her making a fresh start, to picture her sitting on a train

heading for some little coastal town, changing her name and renting a flat. Somewhere quiet and cheap and where people don't ask questions.

The sun suddenly comes out from between the clouds and light floods onto her face, catching her like an insect in amber. The feeling of weightlessness deepens, and a flush of wellbeing embraces her. She keeps her eyes closed and focuses on what she can hear; separating and counting the sounds. Birdsong is the clearest, then the gentle clicking of the silver birch branches in the breeze, and the sound of the distant traffic, an ever so faint roar, like an extended breath. She tries to focus harder, deeper, to sink below the obvious sounds. She fancies she can hear the movement of small creatures in the undergrowth, even something coming from the ground below her - a kind of deep ticking.

If only she could simplify herself down to breathing and feeling alone, and switch off her consciousness. When her childhood was stolen from her that night twelve years ago; she had felt the tragedy of human children keenly: that they must grow up and 'know'; that they had no choice but to pass from ignorance and simplicity into the dark, labyrinthine adult world.

A scratching sound by her right ear makes her open her eyes and turn her head. A huge crow; the blackness of its feathers molten with peacock purples, blues and cyans, looks at her; its button eyes knowing and curious. After a second it launches off into the trees, the displaced air from its beating wings moves across her face, making her breath catch in her throat, the way babies do when the wind blows into their faces.

There's definitely something happening now. Her heart has started to vibrate and flutter, and the feeling of insubstantiality has become so strong that she has begun to wonder if gravity is going to be enough to hold her down. She'll be going soon, she can feel it. She decides to look around her and impress what she sees deep into her mind; but then the view tips, and instead of looking *up* into the tree-tops, she is looking *down*, into a foliage-lined tunnel towards a circle of blazing white.

She feels herself start to fall towards the light, and it is such a beautiful, soft falling that it is as if she is caught on a breath; and the further she falls, the more the light seems to be calling to her; and when it finally absorbs her she realises that the light is full of love, and for the first time in her life she feels completely free.

*The Girl in the Woods is adapted from one of the chapters in my novella,
The Call.*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Corinna Edwards-Colledge was born and brought up in Chorlton-cum-Hardy in Manchester. She spent many happy childhood Kendal-mint-cake-fuelled hours exploring magical local sites like Alderley Edge and Styal Woods; and has taken an enduring love of the natural world into her writing.

She studied English and Media at the University of Sussex and went on to a diverse working life including time as a journalist and treading the boards in a play by Brian Behan.

She lives in Brighton with her husband, and a loving if sometimes hectic, patchwork family including two kids each, a dog, two cats and a seagull called Gerald.



A note from the author.

Thank you so much for reading *The Door That Shouldn't Have Been There*. If you'd like to keep in touch and hear about offers and new releases visit www.corinnaedwards-colledge.co.uk or connect with me on Facebook @CorinnaAuthor. For national news and offers visit www.authorsreach.co.uk. You can also get in touch via Facebook and Instagram.