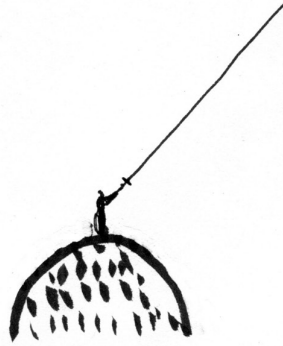


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Five  
Dials

'Love'



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# Five Dials

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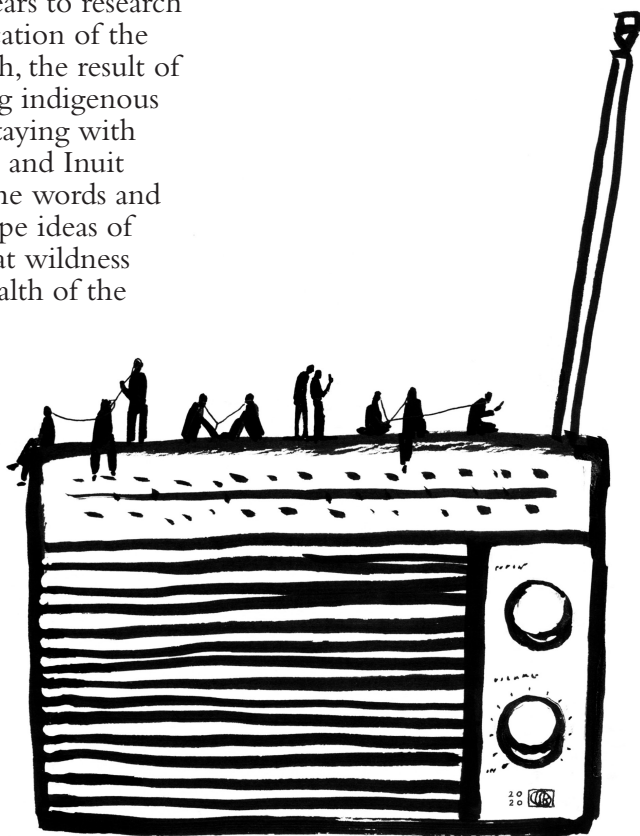
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# LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

## WRITING TIPS FOR APRIL, 2020

Living is tough at the moment, and writing about life is no easier. These days our great challenge is finding ways to refrain from touching our faces, but if you're healthy and still interested in writing fiction, please let us offer up a few tips.

If you're looking for a heroine or hero, turn immediately to the healthcare profession, obviously. Where should you begin if you're creating a fictional healthcare worker for your novel or short story? Perhaps with a description of his scrubs, or gloves, or face masks? If you seek verisimilitude, your nurse might be called on to wear his face mask for up to ten hours per shift, so consider adding dark bruises to the character's face, preferably along the cheekbones, like the ones shown in photographs of Alessia Bonari, a nurse in Cremona, northern Lombardy.



Track down other recent photos of nurses. There are plenty to choose from. In some, the nurses are shown tying on face masks, or squirting sanitizer, leaning through car windows to administer nasal swabs, or hustling down hallways, offering weary smiles and the occasional gloved thumbs-up. They are shown holding the hands of some patients, dispensing food to others or overseeing the operation of a ventilator, if there is a ventilator available.

If you're feeling rusty and need a quick writing exercise to get you started with your character preparation, make a list of the verbs you imagine these nurses enact in an eight- or ten-hour shift. Our list stretched on to a third piece of paper.

Where will you place your creation? Setting is important. Perhaps your nurse works at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore or Kings County Hospital in Brooklyn. If you decide to choose the Jinyintan Hospital in in Jiangjunlu Subdistrict, Wuhan, China, research the local differences. The bruises on the face of a nurse named Cao Shan have different patterning thanks to the strap of the mask she was wearing in March. Perhaps your hospital setting is now filled with materials nurses don't often see. Consider adding objects that even a few weeks ago would have seemed out of place. At Mount Sinai West, Manhattan, your fictional nurse could take a moment from her duties to open a box of twenty hefty 'strong' 33-gallon rubbish bags her co-workers have been using to cloak themselves.

## LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

At some point you'll want to describe your healthcare worker. How dry is his hair? How parched are his hands from sanitizer? Perhaps focus on the scab on the bridge of his nose – it might resemble the one on the face of Nicola Sgarbi, who works at the civil hospital of Baggiovara, Modena, Italy. The injury makes him look like a boxer after twelve rounds. Imagine your nurse's hands, forearms, necks, bloodshot eyes.

Dr Scott Worswick, a clinical associate professor of dermatology at the Keck School of Medicine, University of Southern California, recently gave a reporter some handwashing tips. Worswick has to wash his hands frequently and he finds that soap and water dry out hands more than emollient-enriched foam hand sanitizers. Perhaps your nurse carries around either a small case of Vaseline or Aquaphor ointment on days when his hands are starting to dry.

How does your healthcare worker move? Which shoe insoles has she chosen? Which special socks are good for circulation? When she returns home, does your nurse finally take off her shoes in the garage and stash her clothes beside the car? Has your nurse recently adopted a 'no pens from work in the house' rule? Consider the moment when your nurse disinfects her work pass for the fortieth time and looks down at her smiling photo on the card and thinks . . . well, we'll leave that up to you as you write the scene.

When we started contacting healthcare

workers for our own research we were told: ‘Nurses should all be given a mime class at some point because we’re trying to express so much with our eyes.’ Consider the variety of hand gestures they employ.

‘When you’re limited with your communication,’ one nurse wrote to me, ‘you move with economy. You speak with economy. We’re not making a lot of extraneous movement.’ Remember your characters can exhibit contradictions.

‘The challenge,’ I was told by a Canadian nurse, ‘is to be two things at once. You’re open and closed, kind and firm, understanding but resolute, flexible but utterly inflexible when it comes to what you know is right.’

What happens to your nurse under pressure? Some primary examples of nurse frustration have appeared in the past weeks on YouTube. In one, a nurse from Long Island speaks straight to cameras and begs for more equipment while a mask dangles from her neck. In another, the voice of Dawn Bilbrough, a critical-care nurse from York, breaks as she implores shoppers to stop panic-buying. ‘I had a little cry in there,’ she says, while sitting in her car after leaving a shop, as she adjusts the camera on her phone. Notice what looks to be an empty shopping bag in the back. Examine the faces in these videos. Try to capture the way a frontline worker leans into her phone to enunciate her warning.

‘When you’re with a person, touching them helps you remember they’re human,’ I was told

## LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

by a nurse on Vancouver Island. ‘You do a swab, or take blood, and you can see them, you can see a person’s skin and their mouth and their eyes, so I think nurses are less interested in the abstractions politicians come up with like, “We should get the economy going and let a few people die.” These people aren’t numbers to us. We are actually holding them in our arms.’

If you are interested in exploring your nurse character’s sense of humour, keep it dark. Dark survival humour is a must. Some jokes can’t be repeated or taken out of context. ‘It’s a sensibility,’ I was told.

Many writers out there would now like to create the next *Contagion*, the next *Outbreak*. What are the attributes of healthcare workers who deal specifically with infectious diseases? I was told by a retired pediatric infectious-disease specialist who worked in Brooklyn: ‘Many are in the field because they simply get caught in it. My mentor used to say, “You learn medicine with the epidemic of your time.”’

Should a fictional infectious-disease specialist be harried or calm? ‘They are studious, calm and patient,’ he said, ‘for it takes time to assist the healing.’ They must give sound advice and enforce its implementation. They must focus on both statistics and emotions.

‘The process involves the weighing of data,’ he said, ‘best practices and outcomes. Emotions are mostly suppressed, especially in the care of adults.’

The HIV epidemic changed a lot of this, mostly because doctors in the field were required to go to the clinic and see patients individually and provide direct care. Seeing patients in the clinic one to one helps acknowledge them, their names, their problems and concerns—the emotions. Even if you do not sympathize with the lifestyle of a drug addict you end up providing comfort and advice.’

What about the inner monologue of the infectious-disease expert? What do they think of in the morning? ‘You wake up listing in your head the tasks of the day and how to complete them,’ he said. Make sure your character dresses normally, especially when dealing with children. ‘You do not want to scare the kids with gowns.’ Your specialist will need to have respect for viruses ‘and all of the monsters of the microscopic world’. And when the crisis hits? How does he act? ‘Calm. Without consideration for personal injury, born out of a sense of invincibility.’

If you want to include a scene in your piece of writing about a healthcare worker coming home from her shift, think about the moments when she looks at the empty streets of the world and imagines life returning to the restaurants and pet shops. Imagine her imagining people blithely walking down the street, like their real-life counterparts do; consider including a moment when your character expresses an exhausted thanks at the end of a shift for the beauty and resilience of the world.

For those of you working at home, try to

## LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

incorporate at least some of these writing tips. If you are writing other characters—perhaps you’re creating a banker or a lobbyist or a politician—compare and contrast their experience with your new nurse. Compare their working hours, exposure and access to hand sanitizer. Are your characters equal?

The theme of this issue of *Five Dials* is not illness. We chose ‘love’ long before the coronavirus arrived, and no one needs to be told at this moment how important it is to love from a distance, love through our screens, even via a crackling old landline. Love those in your own quarantine as well as the neighbour you can see through a window. Perfect outlandish mime gestures that can relay ‘love’ through a pane of glass.

Inside the issue you’ll find a reminder of the French capacity for love, a short story about love for a dying parent and some advice on how effectively to love someone close—perhaps in the same quarantine as you. There’s an extract from Nikita Lalwani’s new novel about a small restaurant in London, exactly the sort of business we’ll need to eat at, preferably four courses, when we’re allowed back through the doors. The issue features some timely art from our good friend Stanley Donwood. We may be nothing but an occasional free literary magazine, but we do love you.

—Craig Taylor



# ‘You Have to Succeed’

Jay Griffiths reads  
out her defence  
statement



*On 29 January, 2020, Jay Griffiths appeared in the City of London Magistrates' Court on a charge of breaching section 14 of the Public Order Act during Extinction Rebellion's April Rebellion. She read out loud the following statement.*



want to thank the court for its time and attention, to thank the police officers for their part in this, to thank the Judge/Magistrates. I particularly want to thank the court usher, for her presence and her part in creating an atmosphere of kindness. Thank you. I understand that I have about half an hour to make my statement, and I thank the court in advance for listening to it.

Outside this courtroom, I am known as Jay, and I am a writer. I have written about climate change and the living world for decades. I have also spent a lot of time in Indigenous communities. They are likely to be severely affected by the climate crisis. I have been writer in residence at the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research and worked with the organization Tipping Point to communicate the severity and urgency of the climate crisis to the wider public.

None of this has had anything like the necessary effect, nothing in proportion to the horror that is to come and, indeed, is already

## ON LOVE, JUSTICE AND CLIMATE CHANGE

happening for many people in developing countries. No amount of careful peer-reviewed scientific study has appropriately alerted the public, largely because the two avenues through which this information should have been spread—the government and the media—have signally failed in their duty to sufficiently inform the public, and at times the media has actively misinformed the public.

When I heard about Extinction Rebellion, I felt that it was exactly the kind of movement that was necessary: a movement absolutely committed to peaceful direct action in order to make the media and the government ‘Tell The Truth’ about the situation we are in. That is why I was particularly happy to be by the Pink Boat, within sight and sound of the BBC, with ‘Tell The Truth’ stencilled on it.

By April last year I had decided to risk breaking the law, for the first time in my life. I respect the principle of law. Indeed, one of the things I most fear about the climate crisis is the widespread and terrifying lawlessness of societal breakdown. The Crown Prosecution Service argues that if the courts allowed a defence of necessity for acts of conscience, then the result would be (I quote) ‘anarchy’: ‘necessity can very easily become simply a mask for anarchy’, the CPS writes in paragraph 11 of their recent letter to me. If anarchy is understood to mean fraud, violence, intimidation, murder, etc., then it seems there are already laws

to protect people and property from any such acts now, but there will not be any such assurance in the future when the full evils of climate breakdown hit. Further, in a strictly non-violent protest, acts of ‘anarchy’ do not take place.

My actions caused some inconvenience, for which I am genuinely sorry. I acted in a wholly peaceful way to draw attention to the current deaths and the impending horror of the climate crisis. I am a signed-up conscientious earth protector and I consider I acted out of necessity to prevent a ‘greater evil’.

I understand a condition under section 14 of the Public Order Act can be imposed if there is danger of serious disruption to the life of the community. In my view, we were attempting to protect community in a broad sense, including those not in the immediate vicinity, including the community of the unborn. This is for the children.

The CPS says that I ‘*must have known that blocking a highway could have no impact on the alleged threat. In the present case, there is no real nexus between the failure to comply with S14 . . . and any actual threat of death or serious injury from climate change . . . the only intention was to raise publicity for the campaign*’. I would argue that there certainly is a real nexus between the failure to comply with S14 and the evils of the climate crisis. That nexus is the media. The CPS is absolutely correct to say the intention was to raise publicity for the campaign. This is not so much their prosecution as it is my defence.

‘I want the court to know that for me it has been incredibly hard—frightening, actually—to get to the point where I break the law and risk becoming a convicted criminal.’

I am setting out my argument now in brief and then I will go through step by step with evidence.

- The climate crisis inflicts inevitable and irreparable evil.
- Avoiding a climate crisis cannot be done without first raising public awareness.
- Governments are not raising public awareness sufficiently.
- The media are not raising public awareness sufficiently.
- The media has the power to set the agenda and shape public priorities. However, media coverage of protest is low when there is no disruption.
- Media coverage increases dramatically when there is disruption and a willingness to test the law.
- Peaceful but disruptive civil disobedience is intrinsic to XR, and is necessary.
- XR gained massive coverage and created an urgency in public discourse, significantly altering the attitude of the media towards the climate crisis.
- Widespread press coverage in turn altered public awareness. Press and public awareness led directly to policy change, e.g. declarations of climate emergency and zero-carbon targets.

# ON LOVE, JUSTICE AND CLIMATE CHANGE

## *Expert Witnesses*

I include an expert witness statement from John Ashton, who was the British government's Climate Change Ambassador and Special Representative for three successive foreign secretaries. My second expert witness statement is from Professor Justin Lewis, Professor in Journalism and Media at Cardiff University Research Centre. My third expert witness statement is from George Marshall, specialist on climate communications for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and the UK government.

*The climate crisis inflicts inevitable and irreparable evil.*

The World Health Organization says 'Climatic changes already are estimated to cause over 150,000 deaths annually.' The DARA International report, commissioned by twenty countries, says 'Climate Change causes 400,000 deaths on average each year ... combined climate-carbon crisis is estimated to claim 100 million lives between now and the end of the next decade.' DARA reports that 'the deaths are mainly due to hunger and communicable diseases that affect above all children in developing countries.'

The British government's former Climate Change Ambassador John Ashton writes: 'It is ... reasonable to characterize the climate crisis ... as a

climate emergency.’

Professor Lewis writes: ‘An overwhelming body of scientific evidence suggests [climate change] now presents a clear and present danger to life on earth.’

A report by the UN’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) found evidence that a 1.5–2 degrees Celsius increase in average global temperatures is likely to be crossed by 2030 at current rates of emissions.

This is exacerbated by tipping points of unpredictable but irreversible impacts with devastating consequences, as the *Guardian* reports, which many scientists say have been given insufficient weight in the IPCC report.

*Avoiding a climate crisis cannot be done without first raising public awareness.*

John Ashton writes: ‘One precondition for faster progress within our democratic system will be an enhanced level of public awareness . . .’

*Governments are not raising public awareness sufficiently.*

Bob Ward, policy director at the London School of Economics’ Grantham Institute, has said that ‘The lack of awareness of the UK public of how climate change is already affecting them represents a colossal failure by the government and its agencies,

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including the Environment Agency and the Met Office, to communicate with the public about this issue.’

*The media are not raising public awareness sufficiently.*

Professor Lewis writes: ‘Over the last thirty years media coverage has not matched the significance of the issue or the weight of scientific evidence.’

*The media has the power to set the agenda and shape public priorities. However, media coverage of protest is low when there is no disruption.*

Professor Lewis writes: ‘Peaceful demonstrations with no conflict are less likely to get media attention than protests which involve conflict.’ Decades of lawful marches have not worked. Professor Lewis is quoting solid academic studies and research.

*Media coverage increases dramatically when there is disruption and a willingness to test the law.*

Professor Lewis writes: ‘Media coverage of demonstrations generally increases if the police make arrests. For this reason, Extinction Rebellion have been conspicuously successful in putting climate change on the media agenda.’



## Jay Griffiths

*Peaceful but disruptive civil disobedience is intrinsic to XR, and is necessary.*

John Ashton writes: ‘Peaceful but disruptive direct action, on a scale capable of communicating directly and without distortion across society, is also necessary.’ He is, I stress, the UK’s former Climate Change Ambassador. He has not come lightly to the conclusion that peaceful but disruptive direct action is necessary.

*XR gained massive coverage and created an urgency in public discourse, significantly altering the attitude of the media towards the climate crisis.*

Professor Lewis writes: ‘It is only over the last year or so that we have finally begun to see a shift towards more serious, significant and sustained media coverage of anthropogenic climate change. This has been in direct response to the school climate strikes and coverage of acts of civil disobedience by Extinction Rebellion.’

*Widespread press coverage in turn altered public awareness.*

Quoting a YouGov poll, six weeks after the April Rebellion, the *Guardian* stated last May: ‘The environment is now cited by people as the third most pressing issue facing the nation . . . ahead of the economy, crime and immigration.’ The *Guardian*

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added that ‘Public concern about the environment has soared to record levels in the UK since the visit of Greta Thunberg to Parliament and the Extinction Rebellion protests in April.’

An Ipsos Mori opinion poll in August 2019 showed 85 per cent of Britons are now concerned about climate change, with the majority (52 per cent) very concerned. Citing the effect of Extinction Rebellion, Ipsos Mori’s poll showed the highest levels of public concern for climate change in the last fifteen years.

*Press and public awareness led directly to policy change, e.g. declarations of climate emergency and zero-carbon targets.*

The concept of declaring a climate emergency was developed by XR. Climate emergency declarations have been made by the Church, the majority of local authorities, many universities and other organizations. As a direct result of the April Rebellion, a climate emergency was declared by Parliament in May 2019.

A poll in November 2019 quoted in the *Guardian* found that 56 per cent of people backed a net zero carbon target of 2030.

Professor Lewis comments that XR putting climate change on the media agenda ‘in turn, has prompted a political response’.

George Marshall is a communications specialist and founder of Climate Outreach,

external communications advisors to the IPCC and the World Bank, and to many governments including the UK.

Marshall writes: ‘Polling data . . . shows a very significant increase in public concern about climate change and demands for governmental action . . . I have no doubt that the protests of Extinction Rebellion played a major role in this shift in attitudes and in bringing the issue of climate change to public and government attention.’

Marshall shows that the British government has a binding legal obligation to develop educational public awareness on climate change and its effects, and he writes: ‘As a specialist in communications, and advisor to many governments, I have no hesitation in saying that the British government has failed to meet these obligations and still has no adequate strategy for achieving them. In my view the effectiveness of Extinction Rebellion in bringing the urgency of climate change to public attention, and the repeated demands of the protesters to “Tell The Truth”, are entirely within the spirit of this international commitment. The failure of the government to build a broad-based public mandate for action has required this form of disruptive action.’

So to sum up where I have got to so far: I have argued that, contrary to the view of the CPS, there is absolutely a real nexus between my failure to comply with S14 and the evils of the climate crisis: and that nexus is the media. Climate change

## ON LOVE, JUSTICE AND CLIMATE CHANGE

is killing people and will kill more. Particularly children. The only way to attempt to avert it or lessen its effect is to massively increase public awareness. The only way to do that is through the media. Neither the government nor the media had adequately informed the public as to the scale, speed and horror of the situation. Part of the problem is that the media barely reports on protests that simply involve speeches and crowds standing around where they are told, out of the way. The media does, though, report on protests with mass arrests. And this strategy worked, as all the evidence shows.

I want the court to know that for me it has been incredibly hard—frightening, actually—to get to the point where I break the law and risk becoming a convicted criminal. I have needed a lot of help and support along the way, and I am really touched that, unprompted, my expert witnesses offered the following words. It meant a lot to me to read them.

Former Ambassador John Ashton writes: ‘The decision to participate in direct action of any kind is intensely personal, especially if it might lead to arrest and a criminal record. In the case of the climate crisis, future generations will look back on those who made that commitment, and who acted peacefully and with compassion towards their fellow citizens, as heroes in a justified struggle . . . They are far from being criminals. And if, from an excessively narrow perspective, they can be alleged to have committed any

‘And that is the point. That we will hold the hand of strangers, a little bit of me stays with her, and a little bit of her stays with me.’

# ON LOVE, JUSTICE AND CLIMATE CHANGE

crime, they will be seen to have done so only in pursuit of the true public interest in preventing a greater crime from being perpetrated.’

Professor Lewis writes: ‘To criminalize Extinction Rebellion would be, in effect, to penalize an example of good and thoughtful citizenship. It would, in effect, send a message that the minor inconveniences caused by their actions are more important than the most serious threat to life on earth humankind has ever faced, one that places us and future generations at risk . . . History will judge them in the same way we now judge the civil rights movement.’

Each generation is given two things: one is the gift of the world, and the other is the duty of keeping it safe for those to come. This contract is broken, and it is happening on our watch.

Extinction Rebellion’s vision is a politics of kindness. Its vision depends on values that are the most ordinary and therefore the most precious: honesty, decency, fairness and care, knowing that the finest technology we have is love.

This vision has a map. It is the map of the human heart. Believing in unflinching truth, reckless beauty and audacious love, knowing that life is worth more than money and that there is nothing greater, nothing more important, nothing more sacred than protecting the spirit deep within all life. *This is life in rebellion for life.*

This credo is what brought me to standing in the dock here.

I am wearing this bracelet. A mother came up to me in Oxford Circus with her daughter, about five, who had made this ribboned wristband, and her mother asked me if I would mind wearing it. Would I mind? It'd be an honour. It was to say thank you to people who were willing to be arrested, she said. So I wore this for the child, as she had made it for me. Without knowing each other. And that is the point. That we will hold the hand of strangers, a little bit of me stays with her, and a little bit of her stays with me. The bonds between us all.

I am not going to talk about the law. I am not going to talk more about the precise legal grounds for the defence of necessity. I am not going to include all the legal arguments for our right to protest and whether this is being infringed.

I am not going to talk about the law. I am going to talk about justice. At the Rebellion in April last year I witnessed one of the most poignant things I have ever seen.

On Waterloo Bridge, amongst reams of forget-me-nots, a little girl in a red cape was writing in chalk on the tarmac. She wrote: 'There is no planet B so we're asking for your hep.' She examined what she has written, then carefully added the missing 'l'. Help. She walked away. Then she stopped, turned back, studied it again, kneeled down and added 'Please'. It is unbearably painful to see a child on her knees pleading for her life. This is injustice of the most damning sort: that children are facing lives

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dramatically and horribly affected by the climate crisis. Really seeing the truth of this situation is terrifying and full of grief.

There would be justice if her plea was heard. Justice if her life was protected. It would be fair and just if the next generations could grow up without feeling terrified, with reason, of what the future holds in a world of climate crisis, whose imminent threat of evil will be so great that it holds all other evils within it. All forms of brutality, rape and murder. I feel passionately that we need to protect life—in all its forms—and to act with justice towards future generations.

The job of a writer is to be a good messenger for others, even if it is difficult. A few years ago, I went to West Papua, to talk with Indigenous people there, who are the victims of a genocide because their lands are being seized for extractive industries. It is a microcosm of the situation many Indigenous people are in. A few years before I visited, writers and reporters had been shot for covering this genocide. Yes, I was scared. Yes, I went. It is Indigenous people who are at the sharp end of the climate crisis, they who are losing their land and water, their lives, and their languages and culture. It is their children more than any who risk losing their lives because of the climate crisis. This is for the children.

I love children and always wanted a child, but I am truly relieved now that I do not have one,



because I would at some point plead with them not to have a child of their own. My own grandmother was a Pankhurst, and I am happy to follow in those footsteps except for one thing: I would not want to be a grandmother myself.

I am here looking for justice in all its beautiful forms, knowing that every one of us alive on earth today needs to be looking to a very different court in a very different future, to assess our guilt or innocence.

In Oxford Circus, I was passed a little handwritten note. It said: 'I can't get arrested because I am only ten but thank you for doing this for me.' It is my vow to live guided by justice for the world I love, a world where in the eyes of a child I am innocent.

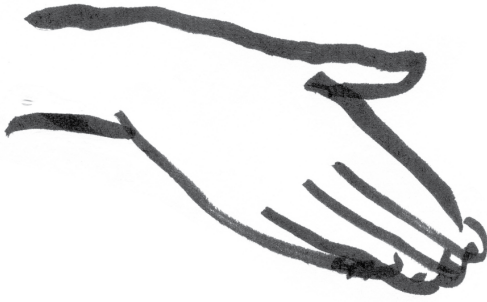
*Jay finished her statement here.*

When I had finished, the judge, Judge Noble, said, 'That was perhaps the most moving defence I've ever heard in my many years [as a judge].'

He then said that 'with a heavy heart' he had to find myself and Hannah Judd, on trial with me, guilty, but he gave us no fines and a conditional discharge, and asked that the court costs were kept as low as possible, £220 each. In his concluding remarks, he said: 'This is going to be my last Extinction Rebellion trial for a little while. I think they only allow us to do so many of these before our sympathies start to overwhelm us. When I

## ON LOVE, JUSTICE AND CLIMATE CHANGE

started, I was fully expecting to see the usual crowd of anarchists and communists, and all the dreadful things *Daily Mail* say you are. I have to say I have been totally overwhelmed by all the defendants. It is such a pleasure to deal with people so different from all of the people I deal with in my regular life. Thank you for your courtesy, thank you for your integrity, thank you for your honesty. You have to succeed.' ♦



AN EXTRACT

# An Audacious Heart

Nikita Lalwani



n those days they were all a bit in love with Tuli, everyone who worked for him in the restaurant. They couldn't help it, somehow it came with the territory: a solid admiration leavened with a kind of vulnerable unrequited romance. Nia considered this oddity often: she really did mean all of them—male or female, front of house or in the kitchen, take your pick—the waiting staff (Ava from Spain), the gaggle of South Asian cooks (Shan, Rajan, Guna, Vasanthan), even Ashan, the clipped French Tamil guy who shared the lease with him, purveyor of crucial expertise from working at 'the Pizza Express'. This is how they appeared to her, even though, or maybe because, Tuli was so infuriating and endearing in equal measure. It wasn't just because they were beholden to him. You could argue that he had rescued everyone who was there from something or someone, but this was more to do with his manner, his way of being.

When Nia started working there she was proud of the fact that he didn't affect her, but soon enough this indifference to his charms was undermined by the fact that she envied him—she wanted to *be* him rather than the object of his affection. He was so expansive, a bit arrogant with it sure, but that heart . . . To possess such a heart, to look outward like that, rather than inward to the hidden pockets of the self as she did. An audacious heart. It seemed to thud against his lanky frame

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with its own strength and vibration, exulting in a freedom from the scrutiny of others.

Oh, it was an emotional time of ups and downs and she would often veer from her happy chatty persona at work to such a loneliness when the sun went down, as though the whole of the day's cheer had been an elaborate gossamer web and now the web was ripped, there was nowhere to hide. She would spend her days off without speaking to anyone and there was a kind of bruise in her speech when she tried to talk upon return to the restaurant. But it was always there, solid and accommodating, happy for her to slide back in once she had pinned her apron and hair.

She stared at everything and everyone in the beginning, ignoring the veneer of detachment that protected other commuters in the mornings. It was the summer of 2003 when Nia joined the restaurant, and that particular part of south-west London was just beginning to gear up for gentrification. You could see the bankers—male and female alike—dipping their toes in, walking past the burger joints and chicken shops with appraising gazes, bodies taut with the effort of remaining open-minded. Tentatively making it down to the imposing residential squares they had heard about, and staring up at the red-brick and stucco mansion blocks and sliding timber sash windows. They would go up to the hushed communal gardens that lay at the centre of these squares, and lean on the railings, not worried by the locked gates that always

caught her out. Instead they seemed to be practising for a lifestyle that appeared to be entirely up to them. She saw them on her way to and from the restaurant and marvelled at this idea radiating out from them, that the responsibility of shaping a life was all down to the choices you might make. They seemed full to bursting with choices.

She had loved the place instantly, in fact she loved the whole process—walking from the tube and turning down the small road, past the greasy spoon, the betting place, the Australian pub on the corner, till she was right there, standing at the panelled glass doors and looking up at ‘PIZZERIA VESUVIO’, each word hammered in gold and angled to form two sharp mountain slopes. They were warm days at the start of that summer, and these huge baroque capitals would be flashing with reflected sunlight against a vermilion background, whilst underneath you had all the offerings in a humble white font: ‘Caffè, Restaurant, Pizza, Pasta. Vesuvio: Your home from home!’

Inside, the space was laid out pretty traditionally: twenty small square tables on the ground floor with the till, counter and wine racks at the back, near the kitchen. Diaphanous white tablecloths, small accordions of folded paper printed with photos of diners and the splashy headline: ‘Welcome to the magic of Vesuvio!’ One candle per table, along with single stems in water—a pink rose or carnation usually. A spiral staircase at the front led up to a function room, with the bar at one end and

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leather sofas at the other—this was the area where Tuli entertained guests, unless it was hired out for a private party, but also where the staff mostly had their meals between shifts.

Some of the Sri Lankan cooks lived above this first floor in a flat that Nia had heard about, and she'd witness them disappearing at the end of the night through another door near the bar. She'd watch them go through a dark portal into relative privacy, one or two guys at a time, catch a glimpse of an impossibly steep flight of stairs, register the knitted warmth of their murmurs after the door was locked from the inside and they were no longer visible. There was something fascinating about the definitive way in which they sealed themselves off. They were different from her, in that they had a clear end to the day, some place that they wanted to go when work was done, even if it was just upstairs.

In contrast, she always lingered when her hours were through, unsure as to what she should do next. There was a perk for staff: on your day off you could come to the restaurant with a friend and both eat a meal for free—you knew not to choose the steak of course, and to stick to pizza or pasta, at most a glass or two of house wine, but it was still pretty generous. Nia was aware that she didn't have anyone to bring with her on these days, but Ava would swing by with a different friend from a different country each week for lunch it seemed, before heading out to comb the sights and sounds of London. The cooks preferred to avail themselves

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of the promised meal at night—hanging out and chattering on crates in the kitchen as usual, directing those on duty to cook their favourites. Sometimes Tuli would send in a bottle of whisky for those who were off duty and everyone would be happy.

Nia was pretty sure that Tuli was a Catholic even though he wasn't often at church; he was all bound up with Patrick, the priest from Laurier Square. They had a thing going on Fridays at closing where they gathered leftover sandwiches from the supermarkets and bundled them with a batch of pizzas from the restaurant, leaving by midnight to distribute the goods on the streets. One time she even found herself going to Tuli in a state of chaos, asking him to help convert her to Christianity. He sent her on her way, shaking his head in mock sorrow and ruffling her hair at the nonsense of it.

'Are you mad?' he said, laughing with an edge to it, the way you do when confronted with an insult of some sort. 'Nia, what do you take me for? Bounty hunter, marking out my place in heaven type of thing? Scalps hanging from a satchel as I'm walking into the sunset? Really? What about your Hindu blood, can't you mainline some more of that into your veins at least? When you come from so much, why would you look elsewhere?'

It made her smile. There was something undeniably funny about this, even though he did mean what he was saying. Something to do with 'Hindu' sounding so exotic, the way he pronounced

it with his questioning twang. And that it was directed at someone who looked like Nia. ‘An affront’ was how her mother had described her relationship to her skin. She wasn’t far wrong—it was no secret that Nia wished for more of her father’s colouring. People around the restaurant mostly mistook her for Italian with her permanent bisque tan and dark hair. In fact, she was quite sure that was one of the reasons Tuli hired her.

‘Where are you from?’ he’d asked at that very first meeting, minutes after she’d swung through the door to ask for a job.

‘I grew up in Newport,’ she said. ‘Welsh mother, Indian father. Mostly Welsh mother without Indian father.’

‘Ah,’ he said, as though he understood everything necessary from that clutch of sentences. ‘Got it. Come.’ Pulling out a chair in front of the bar. ‘Please, do sit down.’

Often Tuli would come back from the nightly rounds with a single oddball of choice—an unshaven man in thready denim with a smell to match and a bag of loud opinions, or more of a smarter guy in a white shirt—someone clocking off from a shift stacking shelves at Tesco, say, or even the red-eyed halal butcher from two doors down. One regular, a white guy in a battered brown suit and brogues, a hovering impatience in his face, was a pimp apparently. Tuli had revealed this to Nia after the man had left, mainly because she asked him the

## AN EXCERPT

question directly.

By this time she had figured out that although Tuli operated on a need-to-know basis, he didn't lie; this seemed to be part of his personal code, a pact he had made with himself. She had the idea that she could find things out, providing he was in the mood to respond rather than evade. It was all about coming up with the right question, the correct code to unlock the safe. And she was very curious about all of it.

He'd sit them down, these finds of his, at the front of Vesuvio where they'd smoke and talk while Nia was spraying the counters or polishing the bevelled glass at the front of the bar with newspaper, and she'd bring them a free pizza of some kind usually, but also leftovers to nibble with him—bruschetta with tomatoes and garlic, or sticky giant olives rolled in a blood chilli sauce. She was attractive to a certain kind of man, and she'd often get a nod of approval, maybe a grunt of acknowledgement for the bust and hips in front of them, their eyes lingering at her waist, cinched in with an apron. She, in turn, wasn't sure if they expected her to giggle like a naughty milkmaid in response, but she took it in her stride, it was no big deal. Sometimes these stragglers would play chess—by candlelight, no less, with Tuli always making a point to put Bach on the stereo—and there would be something almost regal, timeless, about the two faces in concentration when set against that music, seemingly blissful in shadow as they moved those

wooden pieces to oblivion.

Every now and then he would disappear to the back to check the freezer contents in the kitchen for the next day, eye up the pizza oven or get that pale serpentine bottle labelled ‘Martini’ from upstairs, a huge carton of Marlboro Lights to go with it. Sometimes, it was just some cash from the plastic bag that was always hanging behind the counter. While he was gone, his guests would stare at the theatrical masks on the walls, try to make sense of the framed gondolas sliding through pastel sunsets, the strangely erotic quadrants of lace that he had pinned up too, in the name of building ‘character’ into the place.

One of Nia’s long-term jobs was to conceive of a cosmetic makeover for Vesuvio, sort the decor out. Although it grieved Tuli to admit it, he knew it didn’t quite work and she knew he wanted to give her a project that might prove satisfying. The *dee-cor* she would call it, only knowing this word from books she had read. It was an unexpected tic, to have these aberrations in fluency, even though she’d grown up with books around her, a tic that fascinated him. And he was usually ruthless in response.

‘Sorry, but just checking, Ni—when I interviewed you, I had a sense that English was your first language, lah?’ he said once, ramping his accent up the ladder of South East Asia with this emphasizing word he liked—‘lah!’—whenever she stubbed her toe on one of these boulders.

## AN EXCERPT

‘Yes, but I didn’t grow up with ponces.’

‘You grew up with whom exactly? The salt of the Welsh and Bengali earth?’ A pitying look for her predicament.

‘The former.’

‘And you got yourself to Oxford by your bootstraps.’

‘Yes, good, you’ve got the picture.’

‘Because it’s not easy being a nurse’s daughter. Too busy keeping it real in the green grass of Wales?’

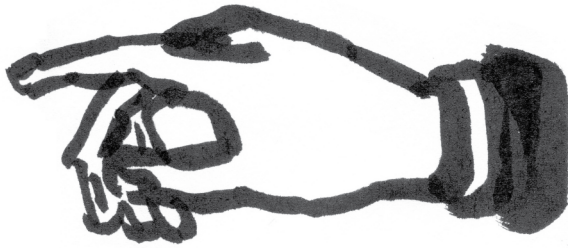
‘I’d have thought you wouldn’t be obsessed with pronunciation like British people. Did they bother with that sort of thing when you were growing up in Singapore?’

‘Oooh. Oooh!’ And then with naked joy, ‘Trying to analyse me, is it? Aren’t we fancy when we get on our high horse!’

And he got out this teddy bear he kept behind the bar—big beige nylon-furred thing the length of his forearm—and made it dance on the worktop while he hummed a melody for it.

Always, in these exchanges, Nia would throw something at him at this point: a scrunched-up crimson napkin, her ballpoint pen with the nib extended like a dart, or the whole notepad she used for taking orders, while his shoulders shook with silent laughter, hand over his heart as though, dear Lord, there was no way to contain it. ◇

*Extracted from You People.*



Stanley Donwood



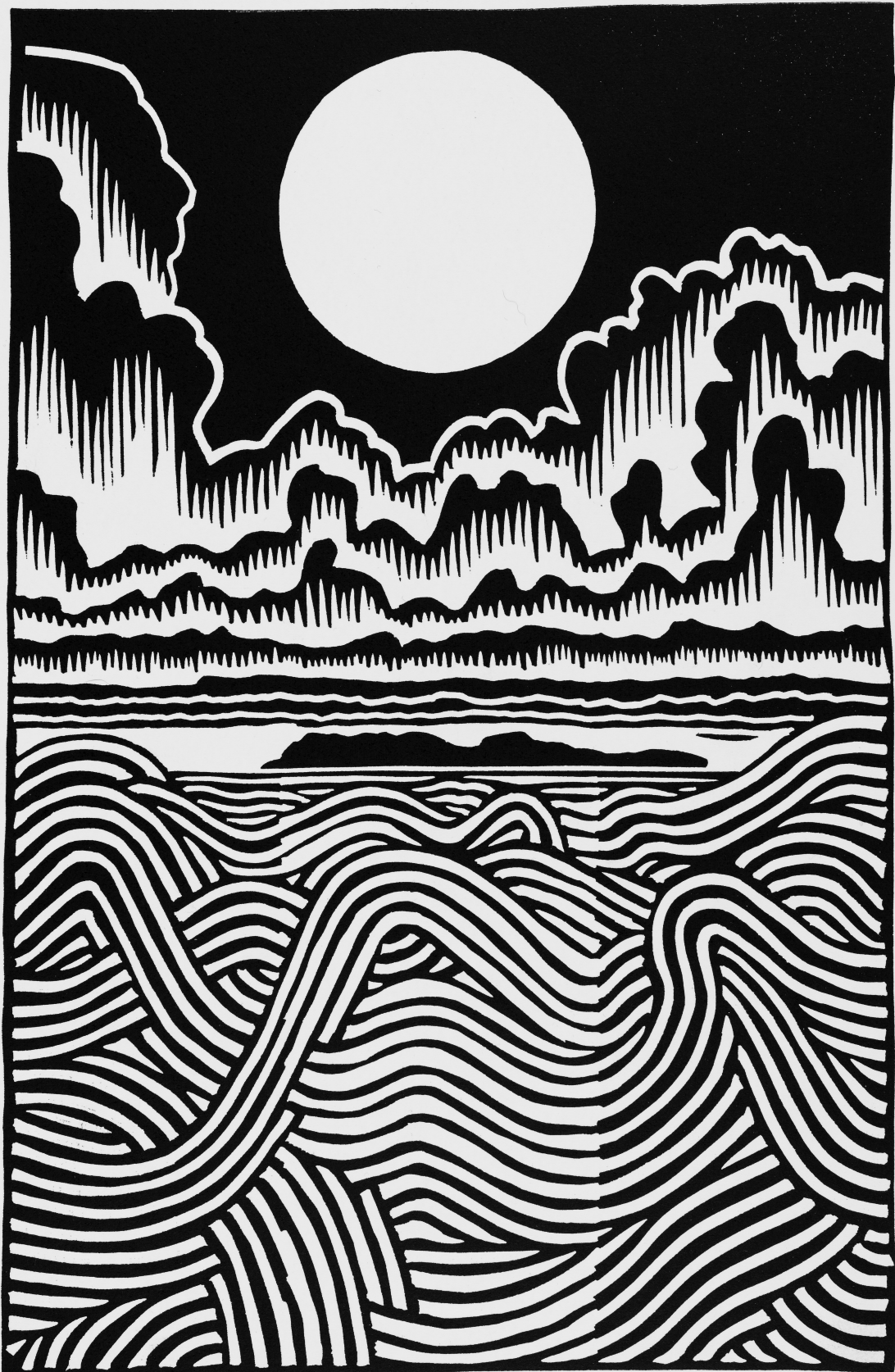




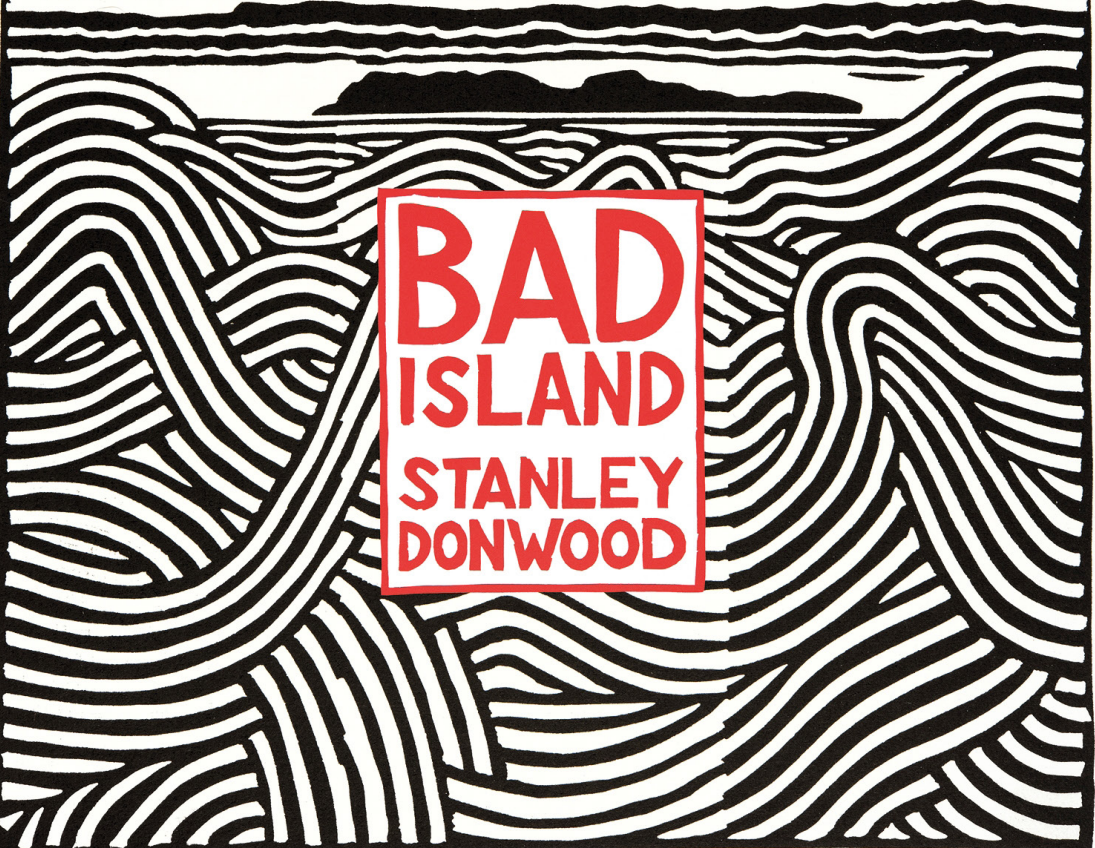
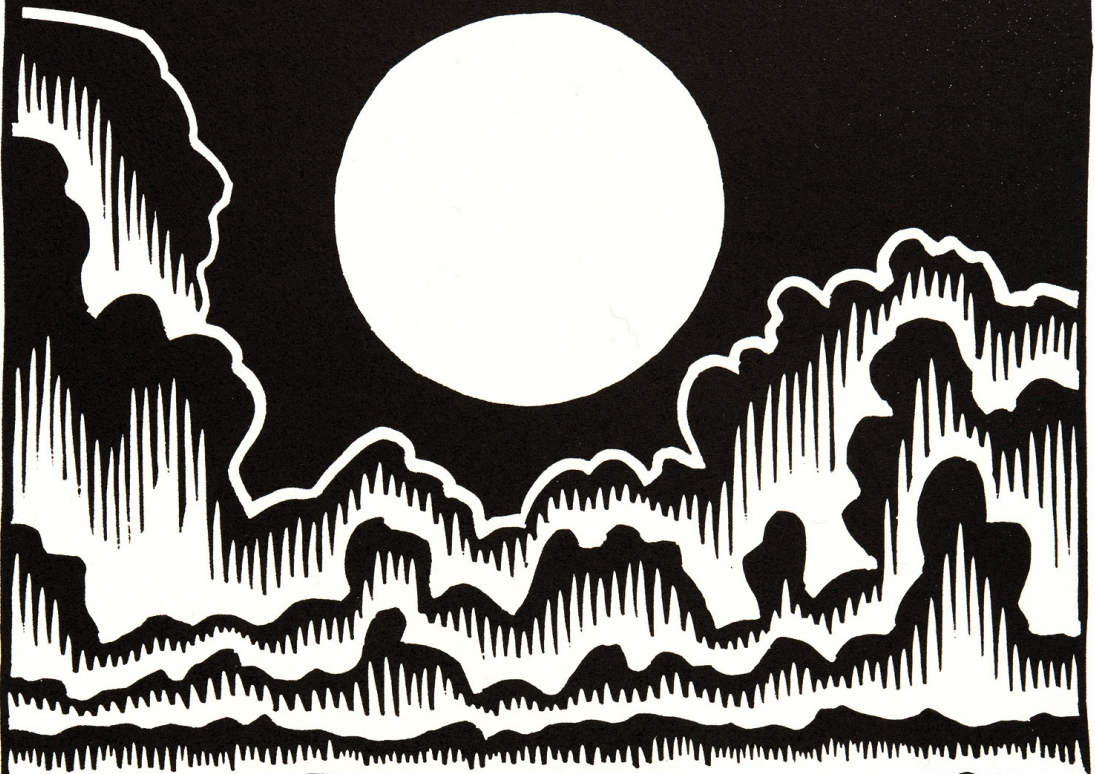
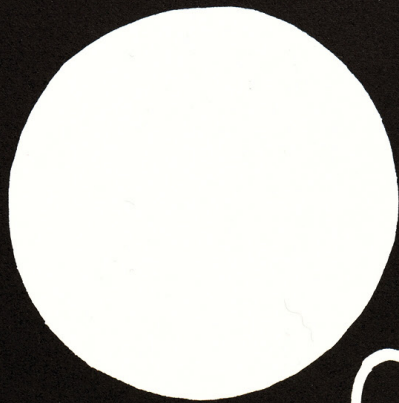






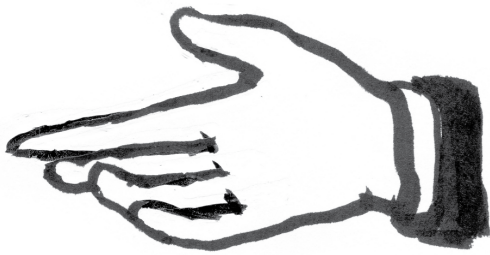






**BAD  
ISLAND  
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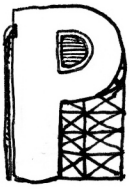




ON LOVE

# Vive la Résistance

Stefania Rousselle  
sets out across France  
to find affection



aris. 4 a.m. I jump out of bed and try to get my video equipment together. I am thinking: 'Where's my camera? Where's my mic?' My heart is pounding. I am so stressed out.

'I've got to go. There's been another attack. I've got to hurry. I need to leave. Where's the camera?' I don't even turn the light on, just grope my way around in the dark.

Then it hits me. I'm suddenly aware of the silence. I stop. I turn on the TV. I sit down. I cover my face with my hands. 'Oh god. Not again.' There is no attack. I can go back to bed.

It was December 2015. Just a few weeks previously, I had covered the Paris terror attacks for the American media. I lived just five minutes away from the Bataclan, a concert hall where three men had opened fire on the crowd. All over Paris, terrorists were shooting at people or blowing themselves up. I ran out of my apartment, not even stopping to change out of my pjs. In my street, the Boulevard Beaumarchais, ambulances were lining up to pick up the dead and take the wounded to the hospital.

I remember walking toward the concert hall a couple of hours later. Apart from the journalists, everyone had gone. We were like zombies, trying to understand what had just happened. How could we ever make sense of it? 130 people died that night and another 413 were wounded.

I had no time to catch my breath. Stories were

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piling up: I went to talk to asylum seekers living on the streets who now feared for their safety, to kids who were scared of another attack. I attended vigils around Paris to remember the dead. After all that, I was sent to the south of France to cover the far-right Front National party in the regional elections. To cover their hate, their racism.

I was working hard, but the truth is, I was broken. For years, I had been a hardened news journalist. Sex slavery, youth unemployment, the European crisis. Distress and pain. Distress and pain. On repeat. And when I came home, my boyfriend did not provide the tenderness and support I needed. On the contrary, what I was doing was never enough for him.

I felt so alone. I didn't see love around me. I didn't feel love. I was overwhelmed by sadness. For months. Years. And so I thought: 'You know what Stefania? This love, you're going to go look for it. You're going to see if people really care for each other, or if all this is just a lie.'

And so I jumped into my car, and set off alone on a road trip across France to see if there was any love left to find.

And there was. So much. It was there, in front of me, in home after home after home. I decided from the start that I did not want to sleep in cold, impersonal hotel rooms, but in people's homes. And not only did people open their homes to me, they opened their hearts too. We would always sit down around the table and eat together. Sabine cooked

an Armenian dinner. Blanche made me aligot, a delicious mixture of mashed potato, garlic and a ton of cheese. And we shared our truth. What is love? What is the meaning of life? We would laugh, cry, get drunk. And we would wake up in the morning and laugh again. Or cry. Or just stay silent drinking our coffee. And that deep connection, that was love.

Every single person I met had so much love to give. As clumsy as their efforts could be at times, they never stopped trying. They never lost hope. Love was there, I saw it. The kindness, the sensitivity, the sharing. They healed me, they helped mend my heart. Through their love. I finally became free again. And thanks to them, I learned to see the beauty in all this disarray.

I can tell you one thing: all these people were fragile, vulnerable and full of doubts. Love was joy but it was also pain. It was ugly and it was beautiful. Love was Salome and Jean-Loup who were in an open relationship. Love was Annick who accepted her husband's infidelity. Love was Charlotte and Delphine who were trying for a baby. Love was Marc who had decided to be happy—alone.

I remember sitting down with Liliane and Michel for dinner. They had been together for 29 years. She was 62, and a childcare provider. He was 70 and a retired electrician. Her ex-husband bailed on her right after they adopted a baby girl, while Michel's ex-wife left him to raise his kids alone. I remember Liliane telling me: 'The first time we slept together, it was like there were four of us in the

‘Stories were piling up: I went to talk to asylum seekers living on the streets who now feared for their safety, to kids who were scared of another attack.’

bed. It was really tough.’ And then she continued: ‘Love blossomed. He’s a good man. We do everything together: the dishes, the cleaning. I’m not the type of woman who has to show everyone that we love each other. But Michel does. I love him. He loves me madly, sometimes to the point of suffocation.’ As we were eating dessert, Michel turned to me and said: ‘Our love is a will-o’-the-wisp.’

For others, love meant a search for validation, a way of proving that someone was paying attention to them. Sabine, for example, would ask her husband for permission to cut her hair. Sometimes, their fantasies meant they lost touch with reality, like Marie-Elisabeth. She lived in Guadeloupe, and told me that after a relationship lasting 17 years, including having a child with her partner, she now wondered whether she’d ever truly been his girlfriend or simply his mistress. Or Yannick, who had just asked his girlfriend to move in together after an eight-year on-and-off relationship: ‘How many times have I told you I loved you?’

‘I can’t even count,’ she answered.

‘How many times have you told me you loved me?’

‘Never,’ she said.’

It was up and down. Highs and lows. Take Rolande, who fell in love again at 70. We were sitting in her green and blue kitchen in Normandy. She was wearing a blue Harley Davidson t-shirt and had her hair cut very short. She lived in a house just

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like her neighbor's. And her neighbor's house was the same as the one next door. Kitchen on the right. Toilet on the left. Two floors. One bathroom with a bedroom on each side. She had added a toilet at the foot of her bed. Her legs were hurting her so much. She told me: 'I was a widow. I was lonely. I was starting to feel tired. I didn't speak to anyone. I was alone with my TV. I'd had enough.' So she took her car and drove to her local restaurant. There, she spotted Claude. 'I paid for his meal. I told him: "You're going to come to my house, and I'll make you some coffee." And he came.' They fell in love. 'We have been together for three years now. My first husband hit me. The second died from epilepsy. I love this fool.'

Rolande is now dead. She passed away in June, 2018 from diabetes complications. But she died in love with Claude. She had taken the risk to talk to him. And she had the strength to just keep going. Like so many others I met on the road: Yann, Alexandre, Patrick, Annick. Sylvain. They all carried a certain emptiness in them, a mix of melancholy and loneliness, but they never stopped fighting back.

Just like Julie. She met Jean-Claude when she was 17. He was 55. It didn't matter. Months turned into years. At 25, she started feeling unwell. Breast cancer. Breast removal. Chemo. The cancer had spread. She started receiving more treatment. She opened a restaurant. Two years later, her bones were hurting. There it was: bone cancer. Another round of treatment. She almost died, and she told Jean-



Luc: 'If I survive, let's get married.' She did. She got married in an old washhouse.

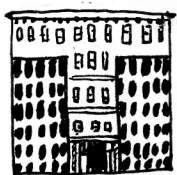
She told me: 'I could die at any time. But there is this phrase that I've told myself ever since I got sick: "I have lived it" — I have lived that love. That emotion with the person you love, that butterfly feeling in your stomach, that pounding heart, that feeling of going to pieces or of being so strong. If you don't feel that, what is life worth living for?'

We are all so fragile.

Maybe the last word should go to Laurence whom I met in the Pyrenees and whose words have stayed with me. I was saying goodbye and, as I wound down my car window, she yelled: 'Vive la Résistance!' She was right. 'Vive la Résistance.' All the people I met were forming a new Resistance: fighting the darkness, with kindness, with tenderness, with love. *Amour.* ♦

‘There is another,  
more workable  
and mature  
philosophy of love  
available’

Alain de Botton  
offers his help



he idea of wanting to change our partners sounds deeply disturbing because, collectively, we have been heavily influenced by a particular aspect of the Romantic conception of love. This states that the principal marker of true affection is the capacity to accept another person in their totality, in all their good and bad sides—and in a sense, particularly their bad sides. To love someone is, according to Romantic philosophy, quite simply to love them as they are, without any wish to alter them. We must embrace the whole person to be worthy of the emotion we claim to feel.

At certain moments of love, it does feel particularly poignant and moving to be loved for things that others have condemned us for or not seen the point of. It can seem the ultimate proof of love that our trickier sides can arouse interest, charity and even desire. When a partner finds you shy at parties, they don't laugh—they are sweet and take your tongue-tied state as a sign of sincerity. They're not embarrassed by your slightly unfashionable clothes because, for them, it's about honesty and the strength to ignore public opinion. When you have a hangover, they don't say it was your own fault for drinking too much; they rub your neck, bring you tea and keep the curtains closed.

But we draw the wrong conclusion from such sweet moments: the idea that loving someone must always mean accepting them in every area, that love

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is in essence unconditional approval. Any desire for change must, according to this ideology, arouse upset, annoyance and deep resistance. It seems proof that there can't be love, that something has gone terribly wrong . . .

But there is another, more workable and mature philosophy of love available, one that's traceable back to the ancient Greeks. This states that love is an admiration for the good sides, the perfections, of a person. The Greeks took the view that love is not an obscure emotion. Loving someone is not an odd chemical phenomenon indescribable in words. It just means being awed by another for all the sorts of things about them that truly are right and accomplished.

So, what do we do with what we perceive as their weaknesses, the problems and regrettable aspects? The Greek idea of love turns to a notion to which we desperately need to rehabilitate ourselves: education. For the Greeks, given the scale of our imperfections, part of what it means to deepen love is to want to teach—and to be ready to be taught. Two people should see a relationship as a constant opportunity to improve and be improved. When lovers teach each other uncomfortable truths, they are not abandoning the spirit of love. They are trying to do something very true to genuine love, which is to make their partners more worthy of admiration.

We should stop feeling guilty for simply wanting to change our partners and we should

never resent our partners for simply wanting to change us. Both these projects are, in theory, highly legitimate, even necessary. The desire to put one's lover right is, in fact, utterly loyal to the essential task of love.

Unfortunately, under the sway of Romantic ideology, most of us end up being terrible teachers and equally terrible students. That's because we rebel against the effort necessary to translate criticism into sensible-sounding lessons and the humility required to hear these lessons as caring attempts to address the more troublesome aspects of our personalities.

Instead, in the student role, at the first sign that the other is adopting a pedagogical tone, we tend to assume that we are being attacked and betrayed, and therefore close our ears to the instruction, reacting with sarcasm and aggression to our 'teacher'.

Correspondingly, when there is something we would like to teach, so unsure are we that we're going to be heard (we develop experience of how these things usually go) or that we have the right to speak, our lessons tend to be expressed in a tone of hysterical annoyance. What might have been an opportunity for a thoughtful lesson will emerge—under the panicky, scared, 'classroom' conditions of the average relationship—as a series of shouted, belittling insults met with rebellion and fury.

It's a paradox of the field that our teaching efforts tend to succeed the less we care that they do so. A sense that everything is at stake and the

## ON LOVE AND EDUCATION

world is ending—easy enough impressions to reach in relationships when it is late at night and the irritation is large—guarantees to turn us into catastrophic pedagogues.

The good teacher knows that timing is critical to successful instruction. We tend automatically to try to teach a lesson the moment the problem arises, rather than when it is most likely to be attended to (which might be several days later). And so we typically end up addressing the most delicate and complex teaching tasks just at the point when we feel most scared and distressed and our student is most exhausted and nervous. We should learn to proceed like a wily general who knows how to wait for just the right conditions to make a move. We should develop a cult of optimal timing in addressing tricky matters, passing down from generation to generation stories of how, after years of getting nowhere with impulse-driven frontal assaults, a great teacher stood patiently by the dishwasher early in the morning, when everyone was well rested, until their partner had put down the newspaper, reflected on the upcoming holidays and then carefully advanced a long-prepared point, and eventually won a decisive teaching victory.

The defensive have no trust in the benevolence of teachers. There is in their deep minds no distinction between a comment on their behaviour and a criticism of their right to exist. Defensiveness raises the cost of disagreement—and thereby dialogue—intolerably.

‘The tragedy of nagging is that  
its causes are usually so noble  
and yet it doesn’t work.’

## ON LOVE AND EDUCATION

Somewhere in the early years of the defensive person there will have been a sense of grave danger about being in the subordinate position, which would have inspired a flight into claims of hyper-competence. It is the task of all parents to criticize their children and break bad news to them about their wishes and efforts. But there are rather different ways of going about this. The best form of pedagogy leaves the child at once aware of a need to improve and with a sense that they are liked despite their ignorance and flaws. Yet there are also cases where criticism cuts too deep, where the child is left not just corrected but tarred with an impression of utter worthlessness. To recognize—without shame—and understand sympathetically why one has become excessively defensive are key to unwinding habits of self-protection and therefore of opening oneself up to education and improvement. We needed those defences once. Now we can afford to let them go.

When teaching and learning fail, we enter the realm of nagging. Nagging is the dispiriting, unpleasant, counterproductive but wholly understandable and poignant version of the noble ambition to improve a lover. There is always so much we might fairly want to change about our partners. We want them to be more self-aware, punctual, generous, reliable, introspective, resilient, communicative, profound . . . Nagging is, in essence, an attempt at transferring an idea for improvement from one mind to another that has given up hope. It



has descended into an attempt to insist rather than invite, to coerce rather than charm.

Lamentably, it doesn't work. Nagging breeds its evil twin, shirking. The other pretends to read the paper, goes upstairs and feels righteous. The shrillness of one's tone gives them all the excuse they need to trust that we have nothing kind or true to tell them.

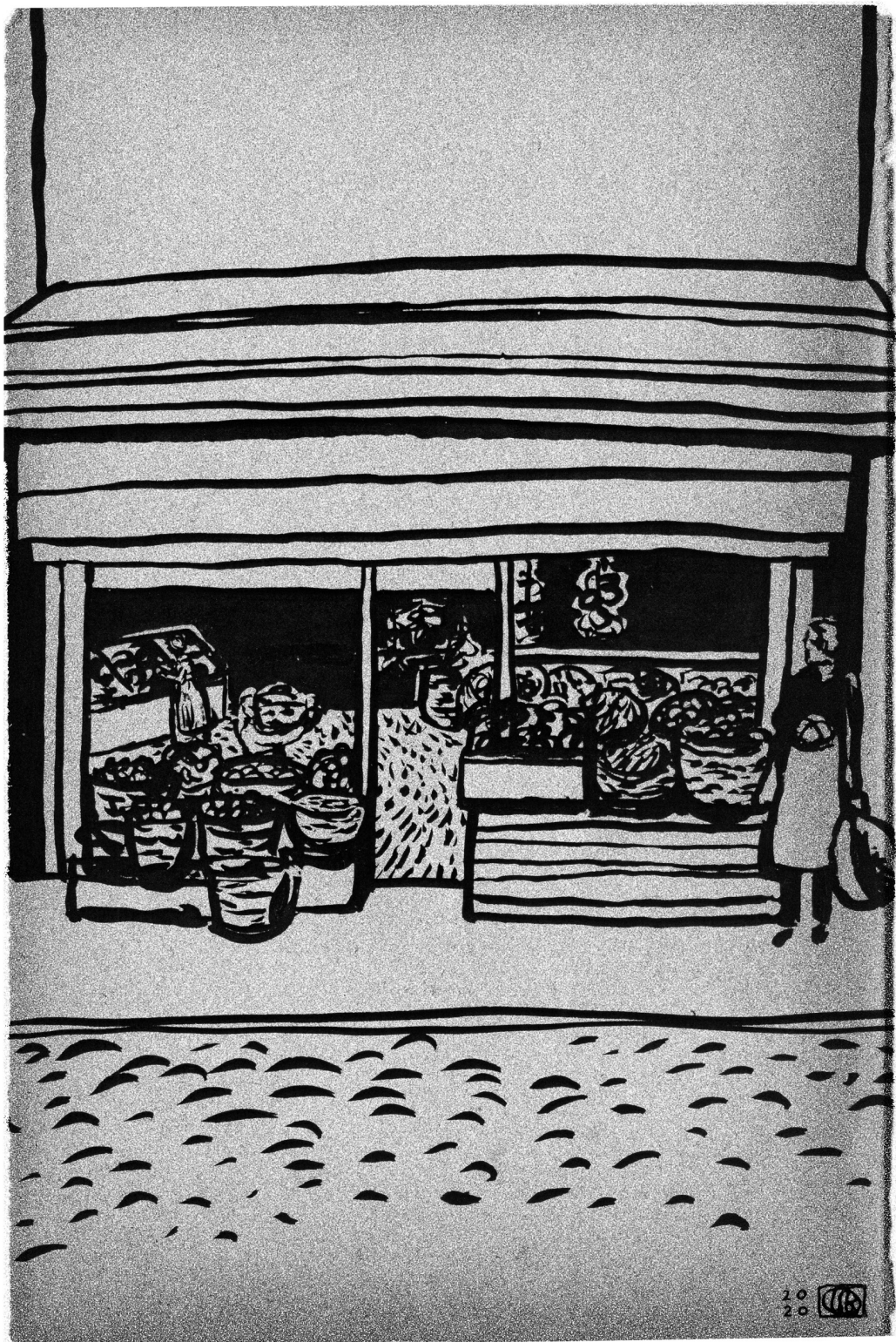
It seems one can change others only when the desire that they evolve has not yet reached an insistent pitch, when we can still bear that they remain as they are. All of us change only when we have a sense that we are understood for the many reasons why change is so hard for us. We know, of course, that the bins need our attention, that we should strive to get to bed earlier and that we have been a disappointment. But we can't bear to hear these lessons in an unsympathetic tone; we want—tricky children that we are—to be indulged for our ambivalence about becoming better people.

The tragedy of nagging is that its causes are usually so noble and yet it doesn't work. We nag because we feel that our possession of the truth lets us off having to convey it elegantly. It never does. The solution to nagging isn't to give up trying to get others to do what we want. Rather, it is to recognize that persuasion always needs to be couched in terms that make intuitive sense to those we want to alter.

We should at the same time stop judging faulty attempts at instruction so harshly. Rather

## ON LOVE AND EDUCATION

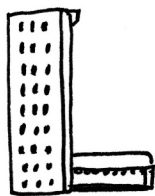
than reading every grating lesson as an assault on our whole being, we should take it for what it is: an indication, however flawed, that someone can be bothered—even if they aren't yet breaking the news perfectly. We should never feel ashamed of instructing or of needing instruction. The only fault is to reject the opportunity for education if it is offered, however clumsily. Love should be a nurturing attempt by two people to reach their full potential, never just a crucible in which to look for endorsement for the panoply of present failings. ◇



FICTION

# Strangers

Kathy Page



Louise's assigned seat on the 787 that took her home after her father's death and its aftermath was in her least-preferred position, the middle of the middle: 34 E. She boarded about halfway through the process, and as always she foolishly hoped, when she saw the vacant place to the left of hers, that there might be some spreading room to compensate for being boxed in.

The woman Louise had to disturb in order to squeeze into her seat wore her reading glasses on a bright beaded string and was studying what looked like a modern translation of the New Testament. Louise extracted her own book, stuffed her laptop bag under the seat in front of her and buckled herself in. Her neck already ached; her skin was tacky. She closed her eyes and tried not to think about running out of air or water, or being hemmed in during an emergency, or of the sombrely dressed crew who had come, just after dawn so as not to encounter other residents, to collect her father's body from his room in The Beeches and take it to the research hospital in Bristol. He had left it, just as her mother had hers, for purposes of scientific research (but also to avoid funeral costs). She tried not to think of how shrunken and tiny her father had been, nor of the way he had greeted her when she arrived at the care home and went to see him in his room: *Hello, dear. Please, pull the plug.* She tried also to avoid thinking of her sister Val, who had this morning driven her to the airport and had said,

when they clung to each other tearfully outside Security, *Well, fellow orphan, it's your own darn fault for moving so far*, or of her worries about her middle child, Elly, whom she had not seen for three weeks and who had been sometimes skipping school.

So long as she stopped thoughts of such things in their tracks and pushed them gently aside, then emotional exhaustion and insomnia, along with a herbal sleeping pill, should put her to sleep once they took off . . . Indeed, she was on her way to it when the address system startled her back into the still-grounded plane with a message about baggage; she opened her eyes and saw a tall young man in sunglasses wrestling a backpack into the luggage rack—destined, it was clear, for the seat beside hers.

‘Sorry! So sorry!’ he said, putting Louise incongruously in mind of Lewis Carroll’s White Rabbit as he levered himself past a frowning older man in hiking gear. Ignoring the hiker on his other side, he removed his expensive-looking sunglasses and turned to Louise.

‘I’m Amir,’ he said, smiling delightedly, as if they already knew and very much liked each other. He seemed half-boy half-man, his face pleasantly plump, his skin smooth, teeth large and white, his black hair and modest beard carefully cut so as to emphasize his jaw. ‘Security was packed! Thank goodness I got on as I have a *very* important meeting tomorrow evening. But here I am. May I know your name?’ Louise’s instinct was to withhold the information; she hesitated, but then dismissed

her reaction.

‘Pleased to meet you,’ he said. The seat-belt signs went on. The plane lurched then lumbered along; the safety announcement began and she closed her eyes again.

Their older sister, Lily, had been too sick to travel. Val had rushed to the hospital for their mother last year, and couldn’t bear to witness another death.

I said goodbye on Tuesday, she said.

The thing is, Louise explained to her on the phone, there is no plug to pull. And at first her father, drifting in and out of sleep, had not seemed to suffer terribly. The medications worked. There had been smiles and kisses, even laughter in the light-filled room looking out over the square. She had shared memories; she told him how she loved him, what a wonderful father he was. But then, after several days, a new phase began. Tiny and emaciated now, lying on his side in a foetal position, he jerked and twitched; he groaned, his face set in a grimace, aghast. He fixed Louise with horrified, pleading eyes.

According to The Beeches’ manageress, Sandra, this kind of ‘restlessness’ was a part of the dying process. Louise did not like the word *restlessness*, which seemed to minimize what was occurring; she felt that while Sandra, as the witness to many deaths, could certainly make that generalization, it was not helpful. It did not address her father’s pain and terror. How long would it

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continue? Was there nothing more they could do? Her voice shook as she asked. The doctor might prescribe a morphine pump, Sandra said, if Harry wanted it. Louise phoned both her sisters to explain the situation, then sat with her father, rubbing the sore places and telling him that what he was going through would not last very long; she was afraid to promise anything definite.

In the morning, a young, slim doctor who wore the kind of frameless glasses normally worn by a far older person, knocked quietly on the door. The physical examination was quick, but upsetting: there was not much of her father left.

The doctor leaned in close so that his face was within a foot of Harry's. 'Harry, we could move to a pumped delivery of medication to relieve these discomforts,' he said. There it was again: *discomforts!* But at the same time, his voice was gentle, and she had managed to keep quiet. 'But doing so will shorten your life, Harry. Do you understand? Is it what you want?'

After a pause of several seconds, her father had opened his mouth enough to clearly signal yes. Louise's chest ached and burned; her stomach filled with lead. He had given clear instructions, but her hand shook as she signed the paperwork.

She was awake again and a voice asked her to choose between chicken or fish 'for yourself'. The bible-reading woman to her right was unpacking her meal and, to her left, Amir was already halfway



through some kind of special dish that smelled of spices and looked far nicer than either chicken or fish. He had tucked his paper napkin into the neck of his designer T-shirt.

Louise said she did not mind and took what she was given.

A special nurse, Amy, had come to Harry's room to set up the morphine pump. When it was ready, she read from a card a short speech about what was to happen, explaining how Harry's body's own resources would cooperate with the drug to produce a feeling of well-being that would override any sensations of hunger, thirst or pain. She wished him well. A sequence of beeps signalled the pump's readiness, and then a small whirring sound announced the first dose. It was miraculous: as promised, Harry grew peaceful, ecstatic even, his glistening eyes fixed on Louise.

'Were you in England for business or on holiday?' Amir asked.

'Seeing family,' she said.

'Ah, family. But now you live in Vancouver?'

'Yes.' It was not exactly true, but near enough.

'We came from Bangladesh when I was ten, to Montreal. A shock at first! And of course, I have an even longer journey than yours to visit relatives. But I love it here. Not the plane! Canada. And now that I've finished my studies—I studied economics and history, then business—I must hurry up and choose a wife . . . I expect you are thinking "Does she not

get to choose?” and the honest answer is perhaps a bit, but probably not so much.’ He smiled and set down his plastic fork. ‘I want to be a good husband. I like to think I’ll pick well for both of us. She can be educated and have a career, so long as there are children, at least two. Also, I would like . . .’

Every ten minutes, the morphine pump had delivered its dose.

That night, they had listened to Classic FM, and Louise had read to her father a short poem by Siegfried Sassoon that she chose for its images of birds set free and *winging wildly across the white/ Orchards and dark-green fields; on—on—and out of sight.*

She had felt so very close to him. Now he was gone, and in the plane, Amir paused, wanting an answer to a question she could not recall.

‘Well,’ she said, hoping for the best, ‘I’m looking forward to seeing my kids. Three. One six, the others in their teens . . . I had them late and I did get to choose who with. My husband does some of the housework. And I have at least half a career. It works pretty well.’

Amir nodded and wiped his fingers on a paper napkin.

‘Very good. As for me, I’m already thirty, and—I know you will not believe this—I have never had sex. Truly! It’s not what you think, not at all. I love women. I respect them, and I will respect my wife, otherwise I will not be able to respect myself. I want to be both traditional and modern

at the same time. The best of both worlds!’ Louise stared back at him, aware of how tired she was, how incapable of a response. Perhaps she stared too long: he shifted in his seat, leaned forward a little, to the point that she caught a whiff of natural musk lurking beneath some expensive manly fragrance. ‘I’m not coming on to you, Louise,’ he said, ‘I promise. But may I just say that you keep yourself very trim! What’s your secret?’

Was he just entertaining himself? Could he be an acting student, playing some complicated game? Or worse: was the whole chat a tissue of lies designed to attract vain, lonely, older women? Impossible, in her current weakened state, to tell.

‘This conversation suddenly seems quite peculiar,’ she said.

The flight attendant was passing so Louise held up her unopened meal, narrowly avoiding the bible woman’s face.

‘Sorry!’ Amir said. ‘I’m just curious. Most of the mothers of teenagers I know are very different. It is probably a cultural thing.’

Louise folded away her tray.

‘No problem,’ she told him, reaching for her book. It was required reading for her current project, and interested her a lot, but almost as soon as she had opened it, her eyelids descended and even though the lights were still bright she plummeted gratefully into nothingness.

She was woken by Amir’s hand on her arm.

‘We’re here,’ he said, before disappearing into

the departing throng on the far side.

Rick stood by the exit, looking for her as hard as she was looking for him, and as soon as she saw him, she began to cry. He pulled her aside, not minding one bit about his soaked shirt. The stream of people parted around them.

‘Sorry. It’s a huge thing,’ she said, lifting her face to look up at him. He’d deepened his summer tan since she left. His hair was freshly cut.

‘I know,’ he said. ‘I’m just so glad you were able to be there. And I’m even more glad you’re back,’ he told her as they re-joined the stream of passengers, he pulling her big bag, his other arm around her back. ‘We’ll easily make the ferry.’

‘Are the kids okay?’ she asked, even though he had told her so a day or two ago. She had had no idea when she left how long she would be away, and it had turned out to be more than three weeks.

‘All fine but missing you.’

‘Elly?’

‘Pretty good . . . She’s been invited up to Tofino with Marina’s family and some other kids so she’s excited about that. They’re off on Friday.’

‘For the weekend?’

‘Actually, a week. They always go then because they get the place free. School, I know . . . They’re taking work and it’ll be fine. We went to see the principal yesterday and that was the deal. A responsible absence, as opposed to skipping.’ Louise could have asked why she had not been consulted,

but it was done now, and doubtless he had been trying to spare her from long-distance, wrong-time-zone decision-making when so much else was going on. There was food in the car, he said, and they could get coffee at the ferry. With any luck she would be able to stay awake till evening.

She felt absurdly happy to smell, before the exhaust fumes cut in, a whiff of pine or cedar in the air, and to see the thick layer of pollen and other dust that covered their car. It marked them as country-dwellers. There was no point in washing it.

The roads were busy but soon they were in agricultural land and within an hour they had passed the herons fishing on the shore and parked in the familiar tedium of the ferry line-up, the huge lot beaded with cars, and ahead of them the twin blues of sea and sky, a few wisps of cloud.

Rick went for coffee and Louise cranked the seat back, twisted her neck from side to side. Both of them now, she thought, had no one but siblings ahead of them. And yes, they were thoroughly middle-aged now: skin, hair, eyes, teeth, waistline, the lot, and yet it didn't seem long since they had met. He had been in her community education class when they had both been living in London—'The Good Life: an Introduction to Philosophy'—and she had known from first looking up from the register to see the clean planes of his face and the dark glitter of his gaze that something had to come of the encounter. They had their first date just before the end of the term. It was the first and only

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time she had to teach a philosophy course—she was barely qualified and only took it on because a colleague undergoing chemotherapy had to withdraw—and they later joked about how quickly they had moved from theory into practice, as well as seven thousand kilometres from where they began. And now, she wrote but still taught though it was a different, silent p, psychology. He drew plans and elevations for eco-friendly West Coast homes, and they were the relatively elderly parents of three school-aged children aged six to sixteen. They were island-dwellers and citizens of a huge country she was only gradually coming to understand. It had all happened very fast.

She watched her husband return from the cedar-and-glass building that housed the ferry shops and restaurants, a cup in each hand, eyes fixed on their car. Approaching, he signaled with a sideways nod of his head for her to open his door and then slotted the paper cups carefully into the holders. This was long before they got really strict about not using disposable cups, but he was already averse to plastic and was carrying the coffee without lids.

‘Dad had Mum’s photo on the table by his bed,’ she told him. ‘The one with her sleeping in a deckchair with her arm flung behind her head. He took it himself, before I was even born.’ She called it to mind for him; how, beneath their arched brows her closed eyes with their smooth, shadowy lids seemed huge and very sensuous, an open invitation to the gentlest of kisses. Add to that the full lips that

lay beneath them, utterly relaxed: it was a stunning image, like something from the silver screen. This was the woman who in later life had shocked everyone by sending Harry to the care home and then dying before he did. Yet he had loved her right until the end.

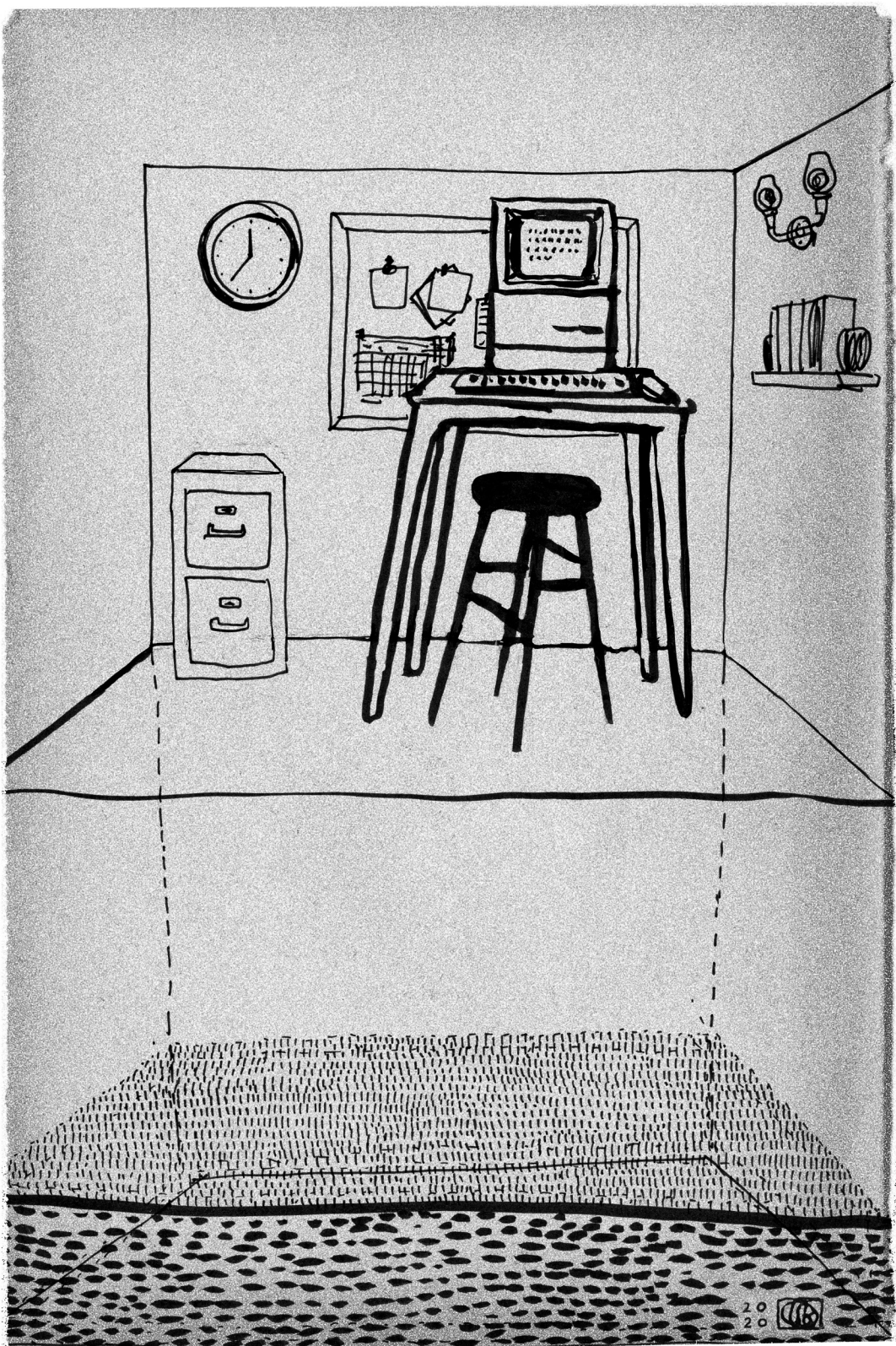
‘Everyone was incredibly kind, and because I felt so very close to him,’ Louise told Rick, ‘in a way, being there was wonderful as well as terrible. I know that sounds weird, but it’s true . . . And this really won’t sound like the me you know—but I felt as if I was being lifted up by a tide of love. It filled the room and every cell of me. Of us. I’m as sure as I can be that he felt it too . . . It came in waves, on and on. Infinite. I’ve no idea whether it came from me or from him, or both . . . I feel like I’ve been in another universe.’

‘You have.’ Rick pushed his seat back and stretched out his legs. Various ligaments clicked and cracked as he did so.

They lay in the car, their faces turned towards each other. She told him that when her father lay perfectly still and no longer breathing, she had felt as if he was, while no longer inhabiting his abandoned flesh, still somehow in the room. Rick took her hands in his. She noticed the familiar plumpness of his lips, the deep furrows in his forehead that had been just ghostly premonitions when they first met. How could a face be so familiar, and yet so much changed, and changing? ◇







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**NO  
HAND  
SHAKING**



**STAY  
SAFE**



55

Five  
Dials