

Close in Time, Space or Order

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The bus swung out along a drop, around a curve and down into a little green depression full of sheep. It didn't take very many sheep to fill the dip, or long to pass through it and up onto the next rise, the next bit of rock too hard to be eaten by the sea. Or eaten very soon, anyway. In the layer of time in which Linette sat on the bus, it was a thing that would never happen. Most rocks were permanent for her.

She sat against the inside window, adding her body to the balance against empty air. A woman watched her from further up the bus, as if maybe Linette was familiar but she wasn't sure.

'Linnie?'

She looked like anyone's mother. Anyone whose mother rode the bus.

Linette didn't flinch or turn. She kept her eyes black and still, as though she'd borrowed them from one of the sheep. Anyone's Mother stood up and moved three seats toward her, holding on to the headrests while the bus swung round the high bend.

'Linnie Ross? It is, isn't it? My God!'

Linette looked out the window like she didn't quite know how to use the borrowed eyes, pretending she hadn't heard that infant version of her own name. If you'd been near enough, you'd have seen the little tremor run through her.

'I guess I've changed,' the woman said.

Linette turned then. 'I'm sorry—'

'I've not seen you in years. You've lived abroad, haven't you? It's me, Esther.'

'I think you—'

'From the shop?'

'I'm not.' It wasn't an unfinished sentence. You'd have seen full stop hit home with Esther from the shop.

‘I’m so sorry, I thought— God, how strange, you look just like a friend of mine. I’m so sorry.’

Anybody’s Mother—Esther—moved back up the bus, and for the first time Linette felt glad she was home. It would never have worked in Spain or Greece, that.

The bus stop came before the village was visible. The shelter might have been anywhere, nowhere, unless you already knew what was round the curve behind the tall grass.

Linette stepped out into the lay-by while the front suspension was still hissing. Esther watched from the bus, maybe hurt or angry or suspicious, but there was a layer of glass between them now, an engine and a timetable. It didn’t matter that Linette had given herself away. She’d be gone again before Esther talked enough to get the visitors coming. People would hesitate, wouldn’t they?

Linette walked along the narrow shoulder, past a pair of women’s pants hanging from the long grass, rotting in the salt. At the further arm of the bend the grass faded and the world opened out along a strand, a spill of houses and a pile of cement blocks dumped in front of the worst poundings of the winter sea. A wide mouth in the side of the country, or something bitten out.

She turned to the beach. Empty. No dog walkers, no weekenders, no cockle pickers or honeymooners. Certainly not her, in a summer dress and bare feet, sitting on something that wasn’t there either. Not her, in army-green trousers tied around her little waist with a string. Her, holding a gritty hand out and down for Linette to grab onto. Standing fast, sinking in the sand while the waves pulled at Linette’s knees.

Instead, there were four empty parking spaces and one dirty van lined up facing the beach.

A man stood with his toes to the sea wall and his hand held open to the sky, gloved and full of some kind of trash that was attractive to gulls. A screaming blur of wings all around him until he caught sight of Linette at the edge of the confusion. He tossed whatever it was onto the sand and turned, peered forward then straightened his spine. He knew her but she didn’t know him.

Keep walking. Head up. Look away.

‘All right, Linnie?’

She did, of course. Know him. He was old now. Of course.

‘Graham.’

Together they looked away toward the water and the sharp empty flat of the sand. He could see her on the beach, too. Not see her.

‘I didn’t— It’s lovely to see you, Graham.’

He kept his body and his eyes facing outward. ‘I could have fetched you from the train, flower.’

‘I didn’t want to be a bother.’

‘Where are your things?’

‘It’s just—’ Linette half turned so he could see her rucksack.

‘No one’s been in the house for ages, you know. Where will you sleep?’

‘I don’t think I’ll— I have my sleeping bag and— Don’t worry. Please.’

‘Not staying, then.’

‘I am. I’ve come for some of her things. An archive in London—’

Graham let out a huff of air from the back of his throat. He had lines now, spoked around his eyes. Eyes like chips of glass pushed into the skin.

‘I am back, though. In the country, I mean. But the house—’

‘Have you groceries with you? Come and get in.’ Graham waved the empty gull hand over his shoulder at the van. ‘I’ll run you up.’

‘No need.’

‘It’s no trouble. Come on.’

‘I want to walk. A bit of time, Graham.’

Four words too many, escaped from the pile filling up her lungs and slipping out from between her teeth. Now Graham would have to carry them. She hadn’t even passed the empty fish

and chips kiosk, not even up onto the road and already she'd spat her regurgitated bones at the first person along the beach, frightened the wings from Graham's hand and replaced them with words unwanted.

The words weren't gone from her either, but his now and all. That is how a curse works.

'Well, I'm along the way if you do want something.' He flung out the hand again, throwing nothing over the sea wall, and climbed into the van.

Linette went up the old road, climbing the open side of the hill. From a distance it might have been anything she was carrying on her back. Rucksack or child. Laundry bag or a sack full of empty light. Impossible to guess the weight from the way she walked beneath it.

There was no sun in the world now. Or anyway the blanket of grey over the sea was trying hard to hide them all, the waves trying to erase that string of houses from the edge of the country. In three hundred years there would be boat trips on clear days. People under a pitiless sky would look down at them, half buried in sand under sterile currents full of heavy metals and invisible particulate.

'Did I think she would be real, really there?' She spoke out loud on the empty road, which might have been the second sign of madness, after half believing the dream of her mother on the beach.

'She wasn't there.'

That is, not where Linette had expected her to be. Not where she always was in the place in Linette's head that was this place. Inside there, she'd been on the beach beyond the car park, in a dress people would call coral, but it wasn't. Coral is basically bone, isn't it? This was some kind of orange-pink like the 1960s, some very girlish colour that would have been vintage even when Linette was small. Inside Linette's head, and before she had arrived, her mother was perched on a convenient rock which wasn't there either. A big rock half buried in the sand like in films of California. The colour of her hair came from one of those films too. Not just in Linette's head, it actually did.

Does. Had.

Linette looked down from the road, through the present muffled light. She had brought her actual body to the actual place, and the beach was empty here. Absent of rocks for seating and of her. Graham had driven off and now there were only the white lines and the two streetlamps at the edge of the car park below, dwarfed by January waves. Nothing else or more.

At the house the front door swung open easily, not a bit swollen. The paper still lay smooth over the walls in the vestibule, but the smell of the carpets was thick enough to have its own colour and sound. Right away it filled her ears and coated the lining of her throat. She swam through it, opening windows.

There was electric and water. No one ever turns them off, no matter how long the meters go without ticking over. Linette made a circuit of the rooms, pulling cords and turning taps, trying to read the stains on things. Most of the bulbs were worn out and she lost track of the number of her pulls, of whether light should be shining or not.

Everything would of course be damp; she'd brought a dry section of someone's *Telegraph* from the train, and a tin of matches that was part of her everyday life anyway. In the kitchen she found a pair of wooden salad spoons. Maybe enough to start on but they'd smoke for ages. She put them in the sitting room grate, lit some paper under them and carried on upstairs. There were no shelves left, no desk, no piles of printing, no portable tannoy or climbing belts. Boxes in the loft, maybe?

On the landing, the paper was peeling like burned skin. She stripped it off and piled it at the top of the stairs. The rope dangling from the loft hatch felt greasy and the light pull did nothing to dispel the dark above. In the morning, then.

She went back down the stairs with her arms full of wallpaper and a fine dust of mould settling onto her clothes, working its way into her nostrils and her lungs. The living room fire was drawing the smoke, but the spoons were barely charred. More paper, more smoke, and out flew a

red admiral. Turning to follow it, she saw another on the ceiling. The kind her nan called a chimney sweep, maybe. Not enough light to tell, now. She'd woken them from their winter sleep in the chimney, and it felt worse than anything she'd done here. In the end the confused butterflies on the ceiling were the thing that choked her and made thick, dirty water rise up in her eyes.

In the kitchen the gas had run out, but Linette had brought a camping stove and a canister. She unfolded bedding and tea bags, a towel and a pot, a string of lights with batteries attached, things she always carried with her from farm to farm under the actual sun in other countries where she was contained, sufficient. Where she stepped like a ghost and no one felt her passing. If not for Graham, she might have done the same here. Slipped in and slipped out without anyone hearing the noise inside her.

Gagging, she dragged a pile of bedroom carpet down the stairs to the sitting room, dumped it onto some brown stains and then went up to make her bed on the bare boards. Keeping to the use of each room, she lit her stove and made soup in the kitchen. The stains had not stopped her, the carpet smell, the pattern still visible through the greasy dust on the curtains.

But then there was the back door, leading from the kitchen to the porch. The splintered frame. She fell back against the worktop and stared at it while the dark came down one layer at a time and silted up around her.

Until the only light in the kitchen came from the gas she had not turned off, the little burner casting blue onto the worktop. She could no longer see the broken lock with the flat dark eyes of her body. Inside her head, spikes of broken wood around it showed yellow and smelled of sap. She lit a match and carried it over behind a cupped hand. The wood was grey, of course, exposed to thick air and carpet mould for so many seasons. When she touched it with the match it took a full minute to blacken. Still it wouldn't catch, though it smoked a mushroom-smelling smoke.

The wings beat first against a corner of the ceiling behind her, and then on the back of her neck. She dropped the match and reached back. The thing fluttered past her ear, slow and drowsy with January, like anyone woken in the middle of an arc of sleep.

There were three more in the bedroom, come down from the open loft and beating like little spring winds against the ceiling. One landed pale green beneath her book light. It made small shadows interrupting her sentences, then enormous wings thrown against the far walls. Anyway, she was too tired to read. No, not tired. Sleepy.

She was there underneath Linette's sleep of course, like some kind of angel without a comprehensible size, wearing that coral dress that might never have existed, but was there now lying translucent over the beach like a final layer at the bottom of the sky.

Standing beneath her, Linette felt the wings against her neck. She reached a hand up and touched something soft and cold on the back of her own head. She could see it, a flap of skin the colour of dead people, a slice of meat beneath it and then a curved window of bone the size of a fifty-pence piece.

'Wait. This isn't—'

'You'll have to do the carpets, Sweetpea.'

'—my head. Why are you making me—'

'You'll have to do the carpets, then you can go out.'

'I don't need to see this.'

'He walked away, Linnie. Remember? He walked away. You've done nothing wrong.' Her mother's hair was the purple-silver of the inside of shells people bring back from holiday.

The shells they used for ashtrays thirty years ago when Linette was small and the house was full of people and little pills and smoke. When stockings hung from the shower curtain rail because women wore them and then washed them out in the sink. When other women left impressions on the beds where they sat, fresh from their first bath in weeks, telling about what it was like to live chained to a tree, while someone cooked downstairs and her mother sat against the headboard singing, soft. When the rim of the bathtub was covered in candle wax and someone cried for her underneath the windows all summer long.

In the dream, she in the coral dress was the woman from then. Her face was the face from a memory of climbing the hill out back, one day in the wind. From the time when Linette saw her only from below.

Linette still had her fingers in the wound.

‘This isn’t my head!’

‘Open the windows.’

‘It obviously isn’t mine. I can see the back of it.’

Lightning flashed between them, pinning the sky to the surface of the sea.

‘Air out the cabinets, and then you can go.’

It flashed again and Linette covered her eyes with dripping hands. The liquid on her fingers wasn’t blood. It was something else that comes from inside people’s heads, something yellow and viscous and essential. And then her mother fell out of the sky and they were on the sand, both inside everyday bodies, and the lightning flashed a third time.

Linette opened her eyes in the dark, what should have been the dark. For a moment it was full of sharp blue light. Then darkness, then the light again. She closed her eyes and opened them a second time, but the lightning from inside her was still flashing in the room. It took some time to understand that she had pulled the light string one too many times. The bulb was whole but the wiring was frayed, wet. It had taken however many hours for seeping water to carry the current across the gap.

She might have burned in her bed, been anaesthetised by the smoke and never woken, slipped out of the world still looking up at the lightning from the beach inside her. She pulled the cord and fell back down into uninterrupted dark.

In the morning, the loft was full of more wood too damp to burn, and very little light. There was a box though, packed with flyers from the M3 protest and some newsletters made at Greenham. And

there were dozens more butterflies, folded and sleeping with their legs stuck to the roof joists. Painted ladies and meadow browns drinking in the mould through the powder on their wings.

The box was promising, but it wasn't enough.

Linette's friend Dan worked for a place called the Something History Workshop now. They had an archive and, he said, an acquisitions fund. It could be enough to set her up in a flat, enough for a hostel while she waited on the housing list. Dan said the borough council might put her anywhere these days. Apply in London and you'd wind up in Gateshead or Plymouth. Well, fine. Linette was happy for them to close their eyes and place her with a pin in a map.

The archive wanted flyers and things from the road protests, from Greenham and the CND. They might take letters and diaries, if they had 'significance' which, apparently, a thing could objectively have.

They did not want to hear about all the kinds of women who'd been jumbled up together in the house, about what that was like. The slow bloody violence of bodies breaking free. They didn't even know to ask about that, because it was the thing that was actually lost.

She finished burning the salad spoons and then fed the upstairs wallpaper to the fire piece by piece. Where else could she look? There was no basement. The slate floors sat right on the bare earth, which was the reason for the damp. Her mother would never have those floors pulled up. Linette found a signed copy of *Woman and Nature* and some drafts of something in the cabinet built into the side of the fire.

In the kitchen, one of the cupboards was stuck. Things had settled and two doors in the corner were in the way of each other, wedged shut. There were no tools in the house, no kitchen utensils bigger than her own fork even, now that she'd burned the salad spoons. She could look in the garden for a stone to bash the cabinet door.

That was the mistake, the thought that threw her back. She'd gotten distracted; the house had fooled her into imagining something harder than bone. She'd never have gone physically through that door, past that splintered frame onto the grass. But her body wasn't necessary.

He had grown tired of crying for her in the back garden, and then of shouting outside until he'd woken the whole house. After he'd banged so hard with bare fists that the doorframe splintered, he came through it with blood and hanging skin on his knuckles, shouting that he wanted his things. People had stumbled up from the sitting room; they were crowded round the kitchen door, sleepy-eyed and swearing.

Linette's mother had shrunk against that corner cabinet, breathing so that you could see the heart pounding inside her, mouth open and showing her pink tongue. You'd swear she was physically smaller than she had been minutes before. Other times, she could fill a crowded room until everyone in it felt they were next to her. She was like that, full of glammers and tricks.

She, Linette, had grown a clear six inches that summer, so that she looked down at her mother's shoulders, folded forward over her heart. He was still shouting and it wasn't hard for Linette to reach him now, with the whetstone. She didn't know it was the whetstone. It was closed into her hand without her having thought about picking it up. If you are frightened enough, if you are not yet used to your height or your strength, if you are defending your shrunken animal mother crouched in the corner, you are more capable than you know.

He walked away out that door again. He is still walking now, though he can't speak without lisping. To hear him, you'd think he was born without all of his thoughts, without enough blood or oxygen to his brain. Linette heard his pressed, breathy voice many times after, his crippled shouts in the road, at the police station, in the chippy when she went in with her college friends.

He had walked out the door again without staggering even, so that Linette saw the back of his head looking whole. The blood, the sticky flap of skin, the circle of bone, were hid beneath his dirty hair.

Over the following weeks women began to drift off. Linette had swung the sharpening stone and cleared them all away. By spring, the two of them were alone in the house like any mother and daughter sharing packets of Amber Leaf and a housing allowance. When October came round again, she went away. It was six months more before Linette shook the dazed light from her eyes and left the country.

In the end she kicked the corner cabinet in. Nothing in there but more sleeping butterflies, clinging to the chipboard under the worktop, too drowsy to startle and flutter out. The cabinet doors burning in the fire smelled like weed killer. Their smoke made Linette short of breath and two more butterflies dropped from a corner of the ceiling to the floor.

Graham was on the beach still. Again. There was a child with him, wearing frog wellies and a bicycle helmet. God, a grandchild. It must be. Graham was holding a stick, drawing a picture for the little girl in the wet sand. Linette walked toward them without shrinking or turning her eyes.

‘All right?’ He didn’t look up from his picture, which was a face like the one that had fallen out of the sky the night before.

‘Where is she, Graham?’

He frowned over at the grandchild whom he hadn’t introduced.

‘I’m sorry, I— Hello. I’m Linette.’

‘This is Rose Ellen. Are you going to say hello, Rose E?’

She didn’t. He had stopped drawing and the child had already begun to lose interest before the words made her shy and she turned toward the water, pretending not to hear. She was maybe five, born years after the house had emptied.

'I see her so often you'd think she was dead.' Linette's voice, flat as sand.

He looked up then. She saw herself through him, rounder now, with crow's feet, nervous fingers always moving like she was threading invisible lace. Her hair was no colour at all. To him she must look like time itself.

'They didn't press charges against you for a reason, flower.'

'Yes, but the reason wasn't because I was innocent. She messed with him. She didn't really mean to, but people went mad around her.'

They turned toward the water together, looking out at something bobbing beyond the breakers, an eye above the surface or a knot of wood.

'He was twenty-three years old,' she said. 'So young.'

'You were fifteen.'

'Sixteen.'

Linette breathed in the salty light, the amniotic scent of kelp, the death of a skate, specifically a skate, that she could smell but not see.

'When I saw her first wrinkles, I thought the people would stop coming because women with wrinkles don't matter any more. I was so relieved to see her getting old.'

'She was younger than you are now.'

'Now I know that doesn't happen. You don't matter, but they keep right on coming anyway.'

The child, Rose Ellen, walked the tide line, but she wasn't looking for treasure. She looked dead ahead and carefully placed her feet one in front of the other like she was on a circus wire.

'I shoved the stone in my pocket and ran down here,' Linette said. 'I walked up and down the beach for hours. I was so dizzy I thought I'd pass out and fall down, that the tide would come in and cover me before I came to. I hoped for that, I guess.'

'Stay, Linnie. Fix up the house. Why pay to live somewhere else when the place is there? Make it new.'

He only said that because he needed her there. They always need you in places like this.

They want to watch you rise and fall.

‘I guess she would have been different if she could have.’

Linette let Graham take her back to the station in the truck. How could she not?

She climbed into the passenger seat and put the box of things she hoped were historically significant down on the mat by her feet.

There was no need to turn her head to see the houses and the sea defence disappear from the rear window. She looked instead at the rotting pair of pants still waving from the long grass near the lay-by, at a figure in the bus shelter with a bobble hat and a wheelie cart, someone else half familiar who had become old in the interval. Graham felt warm and used on the seat beside her, like maybe fathers feel when you are past having your own children, when you have circled a minor ocean and come back to them. There was only a thin humming space between them in the cab, full of the smell of mud and old milk.