

## CHAPTER 6

*The Spirits That Lend Strength Are Invisible //*  
*Pieces of You // The Mortality of Doves // Cold Little Heart //*  
*What If Birds Aren't Singing They're screaming? //*  
*Dream On*

\*\*\* The Spirits That Lend Strength Are Invisible \*\*\*

With strands of hair tickling her nose, Ané van der Meer drew in a deep breath and watched the passing ocean through the open window. Salten. Crisp. Blooms of whitewater here and there. Wet spicks and specks dimming in the late afternoon light with the faint smell of diesel. It was good to be clean, to be finally leaving. She turned and did her best to navigate through the aisles of the Lollipop to the stern: her feet light in the pink *slingbacks* she had been given in New York that morning; savouring with each step the fresh, soft caress of the floral A-line she had saved all the way from Maine. They had been so kind to her, the New Yorkers. Even with so little as they battled to withstand the Crimson Moon they had given her and Corrie so much. The dress swished underneath her great coat and no one could see, but that was not the point, she told herself. This was a new start, and it was nobody's business but her own.

Emerging onto the balcony, the great expanse of the Atlantic and the East Coast of North America a faint line in the distance, Ané pictured herself down in the water floating away, waving up a fond goodbye. Without thought she waved back.

What are you doing? asked Corrie beside her, jittery on his feet. He must have followed her.

Oh. Nothing.

I was going to ask you, he said. We're going up to the bar. They've got a round of poker starting and I'm gonna play. You should come up.

From the way he was hunched over she could tell he was cold, the white, collared shirt he had been given unbuttoned in a deep V flapping in the breeze. Poker? she asked, confused. You don't have anything to gamble with?

I've got the baseball cards...

She felt sick. Don't you even—

They're mine.

—They *were* his.

I know that. But—

Don't...

Look, I was just coming to see if you wanted to watch—have some fun finally. The dimpled, powder-coated steel of the railing felt alien on her fingers, cold and hard and clean.

Why keep anything then? she said. Why *do* anything? What about posterity, heritage, what we've been through and where you came from? He spent his life collecting those and what, you're just going to give them away?

Who said I'm going to lose?

The ocean swelled and sunk. I don't believe you.

They're just cards, he said.

You're an asshole.

Downcast, Corrie glanced out and sighed. Are you coming or not?

Ever since they'd found freedom he had become rash, careless, had forgotten all of the things they had learned. Poker was drama they did not need. Giving away the cards a loss they would never regain. In truth though, she was jealous. Wished for a moment she could just relax and not see in

every eye a threat, in every door an escape. Watching the seething wake of the Lollipop slice and fold itself out into the overcast greyness, she closed her eyes and focused on the sound of the water churning, hissing. A cool wind surged, ruffling her coat and forcing her hair to one side.

Just go, she said.

And after a shuffle Corrie's heavy steps on the coated steel receded away from her, leaving only the Lollipop and the Ocean.

Timber creaked nearby.

Trouble in paradise? came a man's voice from somewhere on her right where she hadn't remembered anyone being.

Opening her eyes, she saw it was a man in a leather jacket sitting on one of the slatted seats. My brother, she remarked.

Ah, he said knowingly.

Possibly in his forties, maybe twice her age—though Ané couldn't quite tell—the man had what she considered old skin on a young face, wrinkles and lines in odd places. She wondered what horror he had seen. What he might do to her. She thought of leaving, but something held her. He had shaggy brown hair and a thick moustache and he was resting back casually, looking at her easily. He smiled and it was a beautiful smile, a lop-sided disarming smirk.

Sorry you had to see that, she said.

The man stood and came over to the railing a few yards away, a good distance. Isn't it beautiful? he said, gesturing to the ocean.

The furthest from home I've ever been, she said absently, reading the calligraphy of the ocean as if it were a story just for her. In the whitecaps she saw another Ané in the water. This time her double was a way off, bobbing in a one-piece with a swimmer's cap and goggles. She was waving again and then turned and swam back the way they had come: Towards America.

Home, he said as if recalling a first love, the word an echo trailing off, swallowed by the ocean wind. And then he added, I'm going home to France.

Ané regarded him again, thought his moustache looked a little more *Dali* than *Selleck*. You don't have much of an accent, she said.

He flashed that smile again. My father brought me and my mom to New York when I was ten, he said and chuckled to himself. I couldn't speak a word of French to save my life.

Unsure of what to say to this, Ané let the man's words drift out to again be swallowed by the ocean unanswered and instead tried spotting her swimming double in the distant whitecaps and rolling undulations, in those ever shifting points and loops that surely must have meant something, a promise, a guide on how she should live from now on. The Lollipop rumbled and hummed. The Atlantic whispered and hissed. As the sky darkened, the troughs of the waves deepened to black and Ané found herself unable to settle, felt she was done here, for now at least. She pushed away from the railing and as unawkwardly as possible said to the man, Well, enjoy your night, And then gave a polite wave.

You too, he said, his eyes blue, she noticed.

And with a curt smile she turned and made her way off the balcony into the Lollipop and up the stairs to the bar, feeling both glad and guilty when she looked back and saw he was not following her.

## \*\*\* Pieces of You \*\*\*

Wind and loosed ember—Heartache—Burn—From a discarded cigarette—  
Your head on his chest—Burn—Hands, pale and shivering—Smouldering ash  
—Leaping—Burn—The dormant forest coming alive in flame—Spreading—  
Spots and spots and spots—Higher—Higher—Flicks and licks and twisting  
chaos—You're running—All of you running—You're screaming, Stop! But I'm  
not there—Dark lines shimmer—Smoke and suffocation—A tremendous  
push-pull bending of reality, as if all the world were a breath held—And the  
heat: The heat is scorching and singeing and unbearable—Everything  
crackling, cracking and breaking—The horses rear in fright and claw at the air  
with useless hooves—One by one, they tear up the road taking the wagons—  
Some leaders arrest their steeds with hands quickly chafed raw—Gargantuan  
hive—The forest is one hulking miasma enclosing, pushing you up and into  
the mountains—Kirill wrapped around you limbs and helps you on—Come  
on, he shouts, We have to get higher—You peer through the smoke as mist,  
the acrid dryness scratching your throat—His ankle is broken—Down the  
mountain in a place you would forget how to get to, Rada's grave covers in  
smouldering branch and bramble, in charcoal trunks orange with heat and

ruined leaves alight as upturned chandeliers—Up and up and into the mountains you go and soon you are alone—You and Kirill—Ash as snow—Stings of embers on skin—His long hair wet with sweat—Come on! he screams—Around bends of road, the valley aflame, Kirill falls—He cries out in pain—You cry too—Help him up—

On and on and on.

A thick branch crashes across the road metres before you, sending up an explosion of millions of embers all death rising like fireflies—A hiss of pain—Kirill is on the ground again in agony. Go! he's saying.

You're saying you can't go, can't leave him.

He's telling you, go.

You feel the bitumen soft under your feet, melting into the soles of your shoes—And like liquid from a dam burst, a maelstrom of flames as towers bellow up the road—Kirill writhes and hisses through clenched teeth. Go, please, he's saying, pleading now. Siberian fir crashes and whispers and whistles off where you cannot see—A cypress falls behind you—Run! he's shouting, and you steal a last glance, a caress, you kiss him long with the weight of everything you wished to have done together. Go, he says, and then you run, leaving him.

And deep inside you know this is what you've wanted all along. A closeness to the end. Real love. Real risk. Real loss.

You run and run and run.

And I'm running too—into darkness—the dogs panting in strides beside me. You're walking up the hill to me, white as a ghost in the night—Blood on your face, you're saying: I'm leaving, Leo, I can't stay—And my body erupts in flames, shot through as daggers piercing and I fall to my knees at your feet. I can see myself as a torch, a late night bonfire to the black and you disappear and I am rolling onto my back. Up there in black oil, a star twinkles away.

Out to the snow, arms under mine pulling me inside before... the chest of drawers and the royal green walls and the window dark—The smell of smoke thick, the room unbearably hot—I sweat and swelter beneath blankets. Mother stops crying.

He cannot look at you, she says and dabs at her eyes with a cloth. She darkens over, her voice becomes bitter. What were you doing out there, half naked? she asks. Do you mean to shame us?

No, I say and mean it. No.

Then why?

Clothes I don't remember putting on scrape my skin as if sandpaper—Oksana—The shower—You and Kirill and your glances—Laughing—Crying on his chest at the funeral—I'm running out to the snow, shedding my clothes. I want to tell her I don't know why

Cloth tightly wrapped, threaded between her fingers, her pockmarked and creased face red and wet.

She says: Leonid Leontyeva, my son—

Her invocation of my name like an abyss opening in the floor and I fall in.

—Your father is dying. How dare you...

In the morning, I am still dizzy but I change out of the clothes logged with sweat and put on new layers and go downstairs to chop the surplus of wood. I don't see Father or Mother. There is a silence to the building. Not even the sound of the neighbours reverberate through the walls. Outside I reason they must have used a good portion of the wood to heat the house for me, suffered their own uncomfot so whatever work the frost had done to me could be undone. With the axe I divide ten hulks into twelve wedges and try and calculate if we'll have enough to last until Spring. Inside and reading the pictures on the mantelpiece, some with you in them, I imagine Mother upstairs with Father reading. I wonder what they speak of, what they've

spoken of all these years. Do they mention the weather? The neighbours and the children who should never have been born? You and me? The end? Do they talk of themselves? If sometimes when they close their eyes, do they see the place where they used to live when they were young?

I close the front door quietly and with soft steps across the snow, fill the car from our quarterly ration with ten litres of gasoline.

\*\*\* The Mortality of Doves \*\*\*

Ané saw the man from the stern again that following night. This time he wore a hooded weatherproof jacket and jeans, and this time she allowed herself to relax a little. He asked about Corrie and the poker game and she told him Corrie had won but had given back his winnings - though only after she had told him to. The man apologised if he had offended her, had said something causing her to leave.

No, she assured him, It's just hard for me with new people...I, I was just unsettled with it being the first night and all that jazz.

*All that jazz?* Ané questioned herself and cringed. She quickly tried remembering some of what he had said last night. Where are they now? She asked; awkwardly she felt.

Sorry?

I mean your parents.

Oh, he said, as though the question had thrown him. They're in Lille. In France. I'm going to meet them.

*France*, Ané thought with a prick of excitement and for a moment forgot where she was, who she was now and she pictured post-card images of the

Seine River, the Eiffel Tower, old *Snapchat* quips and *Instagram* filtered photos of the *Catacombs*; drafts of Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* on the walls of the *Louvre*. She felt a new feeling, herself becoming poetic, an energy flushing to her face. I always wanted to go to France; to Paris, she said, the city of love. To walk the Champs-Élysées and feel the history, hear the warm echo inside the Notre-Dame and drink champagne at sunset under the willow on Pont Neuf.

The man chuckled. I've never been to Paris, he said. You probably know it better than I do—The way it was at least, I'm sorry to say. He looked apologetic. It's all gone now, a slum apparently. I've heard the Eiffel Tower is rusted and broken, the lifts ceased, the levels only frequented by delinquents and jumpers.

Ané's heart sank and she felt the newness inside dwindle, knew what drove people to such things. My god, she whispered.

The man made an odd, short sound under his breath and then considered his fingers as if studying a coin.

As time went on and they continued to meet on the rear balcony intentionally and accidentally, Ané now finding his easy company comforting, realised one night she didn't even know his name.

Introducing herself, she said, I'm Ané by the way.

He must have misheard for he asked, What's a nay?

My name, she said. It's Ané. A-N-E.

Ah, he said, You can call me Deene, and they shook hands somewhat awkwardly. His hand was hard and calloused.

On the balcony they sank into rhythms of comfortable silence and easy conversation. They spoke only of life before the Discovery and this suited her: Ané told about Corrie and growing up with their parents divorced; How their father had fought in the Afghan war and suffered from PTSD; How she hoped Corrie wouldn't bear the same burden and they could make a real, fresh start

in Russia; Deene confessed he had been married but didn't believe in divorce. Even in spite of his wife having left him years before.

Is she still alive? Ané asked.

I don't know, he said.

She said, I'm not sure I've ever truly been in love.

You'll know, he said. It's when you do things you never imagined. As if a passion is working through you and you're on this crazy roller coaster you're not in control of. That's when you're really in love.

She tried to imagine relinquishing control. It sounds terrible, she said and Deene laughed, and she liked the way he laughed. But— she started and then looked at him again, a bit differently now—do you think you'll ever want to feel like that again? And how does that work if you're still married, I mean, not that anyone is still keeping records, but, like—yeah, you know what I mean.

He looked to the sky and said sombrely, I'm not sure, I think I only have room in my heart for one great love in my life.

At the time, Ané thought when Deene said this he was being romantic and had meant his separated wife. But later she realised he was talking about something very very different.

They never ran into each other at the bar or at meals on the upper deck, or wandering around the Lollipop. When Ané would laze on the sun drenched chairs of the main deck during the day with the others, he was nowhere to be seen. It was only ever in the afternoons or late at night on the balcony at the stern that they saw each other.

Where do you go? she asked eventually. How come I don't see you around?

I don't know, he said. I'm below deck most of the time, in a store room behind the engine.

You're staff?

He laughed, No. I mainly read and pray. I could give you a royal tour if you like. He mimed with his hands enthusiastically, announcing as if a circus conductor: Here's the ladder, here's corner A, corner B, the plumbing from the water tank. O behold the copious unknown stains; I call this one Arnold. And now our final spectacle, our finest detail... a total and complete lack of windows!

Ané giggled and missed what he'd said about praying. Bravo, bravo, she said and clapped,

Thank you, he said and bowed.

But really, she said. Like, you should get out and, like, meet people.

I'm meeting you, aren't I? he said.

And there was something in the way he'd said *You*, that made her feel warm inside; special if she could have put a word to it. And that was not a way she had felt in a long time.

\*\*\* Cold Little Heart \*\*\*

Today I thought to visit our old house, the one we built together on the hill. The neighbours' children were playing in the snow in their thick jackets as I left, little snowball eruptions. Felix and Nina and Yuri and Irina. How big they've grown, you'd be surprised. When the time comes they'll probably be in their late teens or early twenties, which isn't a bad run when you think about it—maybe by then they'll have found first love, smoked a cigarette or got drunk, felt the un-justnessness of it all and felt hatred for their parents, for the world that put them here.

I take *Third Ring Road* and then *Leningradsky Avenue* onto the highway. Remember when we used to drive this way to visit my parents? You'd drive on the empty highway swerving across all of the lanes and I'd hang out the window and wave my arm as if a cowboy.

Exiting at *Sholokhovo*, along the main roads of town, I am filled with a sudden depth as if just in this moment I am only now finally understanding what has already happened, the reality of what we've for so long been told would occur. No one on the streets. The removal of people, houses deteriorated and abandoned, fences down and roofs broken, vines up walls

and snow dusted shrubs growing from windows. And I feel an energy jump from me and out of the car and into the sky and across the country to you, some invisible tether connecting us for better or worse.

When I get to our drive the gate is closed but there is no padlock. I get out and carefully un-loop the chain and bolt and then drive the car through, closing the gate behind me. Silent and imposing, the woods are thick and overgrown, fronds and vines and small shrubs falling over the edge of what's left of the gravel road. As I drive I imagine what it might have been like for you that night of the bombing, to walk this way knowing what you would do. I search myself for what thoughts must have been running through your head but find only a dark cloud, memories of you running up the Ural Mountains with Kirrill, the forest aflame. I put the thoughts aside and accelerate.

As I get out of the car I half expect Poncho and Laika to gallop from the veranda, to see your smiling face at the front door, your deep dimples and excited eyes welcoming me. The timber siding is dark and faded, the low roof and Dutch gable rusting through breaks in the snow. The timber railing near the front door still bears our initials, the carved pale lines put there when we finished building: LL//JB. I step up to the glass windows of the lounge room and peer inside. Someone else has lived here since us; there is a leather couch in the living room I don't recognise and rubbish on the floor. A second of hopeful thought asks if maybe it had been you—lingering.

I sit on the steps and rest my arms on my knees and watch the rolling sheet of clouds pass overhead, the branches of the trees swaying and sweeping the dusty sky, the drops of defrosting snow falling softly.

Falling to a slight dip, the road clears of smoke and the fire feels distant. You run to the edge of the road, to a clearing where piles of sand and blue metal and bitumen are grown over with crawling weeds and sprouts of leafy stems. You collapse onto your back from exhaustion and cry and then scream a long, loud sound to the dirty sky wafting high above you.

It is so strange, and maybe you would know what this means: On the breeze is the sweet fragrance of jasmine. The smell is overpowering, distinct. I try and locate the source and then remember and go to our spot among the bushes by the big oak tree where we used to have the swing before the rope snapped. Kneeling, I dig the snow away and find what's left of the jasmine bush, but find it dead or close enough to dead. The vines among the duff and dirt-snow are hard and dark and bare.

The day when we brought the little jasmine plant home and planted it here was a spring afternoon; a Sunday. At the markets in Bashnya Shukhova, there was the American woman and her stall, remember? Her red, white, and blue tent. She had so much shit, it was ridiculous: like Native American dream catchers hanging from the roof of the tent; tables of old and browned baseballs and caramel-leather baseball mitts; action figurines next to lines of small plastic Empire State Buildings and Statues of Liberty; unopened cartons of Marlboro cigarettes; cowboy hats in tan and black, and Matchbox cars of every type. You wandered around for hours but afterwards all you wanted was a pot of jasmine. You said to me the white blossoms reminded you of home in San Diego.

For me, it felt like purity and hope, like what we should have been.

Winding. Your steps were heavy and laboured. Misted smoke obscured your view and the way curved and turned, meaning you could never see more than a few hundred yards ahead. After a long, uphill bend that burned at the muscles in your calves and thighs—as if from a dream—there, standing, serenely eating leaves off a fir tree, were two large draft horses: one a lush brown; and the other spotted white and grey. They were harnessed to one of the four-wheeled hub wagons, its tarpaulin tight, the stores underneath still safe and untarnished.

Arms outstretched as if to push something unseen, It's ok, It's ok, you said and drew closer to the horses. I won't hurt you. You remembered some of

what Oksana had taught you. *Ne volnuysya, ty bezopasno*, you said and both horses regarded you for a moment and settled. You ran the flat of your hand along the brown horse's neck and gently brushed its black mane with your open fingers. You decided to name them Calvin and Hobbes after cartoons from your childhood and in their eyes you saw another world.

We must have gone to the markets maybe four or five times after buying the jasmine. Always on a Sunday, and she was always there, always with some new Americans, some little thing or new collection.

Did you take the *My Little Pony* figurine I bought you for your 32nd birthday? With its pink body and golden hair and huge cartoon eyes? I didn't find it in your things, the sum of our accrued, shared life together. Either way it must be gone now.

It's Sunday today, December the 16th. I wonder if the American woman and her stars-and-stripes of a tent might still be there. The strange lady in the market. The American and her stupid abundance of dead and useless pop culture and memories of that place that couldn't even take care of its own; the place you decided to go back to.

Who told you?

I've asked myself over and over, cursed, plagued and cut myself into pieces over how you knew about the caravan. I grew up here, have known this city my whole life and I had never heard of groups travelling to America after the Discovery, much less East over the Urals. How?

How?

And then it's there:

The American woman, it has to be her. Why didn't I see it before?

An excitement fills me, a closeness, a verge waiting for me to cross. I leap from the steps and run to the car, drive down our snowed over gravel driveway fresh with the tracks of me arriving, and I try and remember the way to the markets at Bashnya Shukhova.

\*\*\* What If Birds Aren't Singing They're Screaming? \*\*\*

Ané had always hated how easy it was for Corrie to fall asleep. In the stretcher against the bare drywall, he snored contentedly, insultingly. She glared at his vague heaving shape in the darkness. On the Lollipop she struggled with the sea and sleep; In their room, the movement of the boat became amplified as if she were a pendulum set in motion. She fought fearful imaginations of someone breaking in; battled nausea and insomnia nightly. What rest she did find was disturbed and frustrated, plagued by memories of evading the Crimson Moon; of hiding in dark places without food or water, and memorising verses of the bible for fear of being found as unbelievers: She would silently mouth the words of Matthew 7:6 - *Don't give what is holy to dogs or toss your pearls before pigs.* Matthew 7:18 - *A good tree cannot bear bad fruit. A bad tree cannot bear good fruit.* Again. *A good tree cannot bear bad fruit. A bad tree cannot bear good fruit.* Corinthians 6:2 - *Don't you know the saints will judge the world?*

What is the field of blood? she'd test Corrie as they were making their way to New York huddled under a rail bridge or in a wardrobe of someone's abandoned bedroom. And he'd answer: Where mankind acquired a field with

the price of his wickedness.

And who is man?

Judas Iscariot, he'd say. Son of Simon of Bethany; of Simon the leper.

Slowly aggravated by the rhythm of coarse groaning emanating from him, Ané van der Meer dressed her borrowed fox pyjamas in her great coat and ventured up to the bar. There, the bartender whom she had learned was named Peter, served her rum by the double shot—the only cure for her restless nights—over the old *Wurlitzer* upright piano which was the bar. And this time he drank with her a dram of whisky, a Glenlivet 18-year-old. He sipped at the tumbler carefully.

I can never drink that stuff, she said.

He looked at her oddly.

Anyway, why aren't you drinking a vodka?

Not all Russian's drink vodka, he said and smiled and then raising his tumbler declared, *Zazdarovye*.

*Zazdarovye*, she said, and then in-turn raised and drank.

Two tumblers later, her head light and warm and almost ready for rest, dizzy with the drunken fuzz she sometimes thought might be what happiness felt like, Ané made her way down the stairs and along the aisles to the balcony. The sea was violent. All were asleep but for a few passengers on their backs passed out on the bench-seats made yellow in the artificial light.

On arriving, he saw her. We have to stop meeting like this, Deene said with noticeable irony.

She went to the rail beside him.

And proudly he told her, I finally finished my puzzle.

Through her drunken haze, Ané looked down to where the stern met the churning water, felt the drop and the loud ocean beckoning her. She didn't care about his puzzle, she wanted something more from him tonight. The wake broiled and roared and frothed like the mammoth torrent of a waterfall

made infinite. She wondered on what it would be like to climb onto the railing and jump; if the air would rush up at her like a welcoming cushion; if he would jump with her. She counted back the years in her mind, curled a rope of loosed hair behind her ear; the strands dry on her finger. Have you ever gone skydiving? she asked.

I wish, he said turning back towards the ocean, oblivious. You?

When I was young, she began and edged closer to him, You could go out to this town called, Lebanon, about half an hour from where I used to live in Portland, Maine. There was a skydiving company who'd take you up in a rickety old plane and you could jump tandem from 9,000feet, 14,000feet, so high when you came down the world would look like a model. My parent's friends, this couple—George and Lara—used to always bring up how they had gone there and done it; faced their fears and jumped out. Every time they came over, like—in any conversation with depth, or on overcoming adversity, they'd relate whatever we were talking about—twist it somehow—to that experience of leaping from a plane. One single decision. Surrender. How the air felt like a cushion. How they felt safe falling; like nothing could happen. My parents would complain about them afterwards, but I found what they'd said to be so beautiful, inspiring. I started saving, planned to go when I turned eighteen, but by then, well...that's it isn't it? You know—Everything had already gone to shit by then and it was shut down. I think they fled with the plane.

Ané watched the dark rutted lines of the wake stew below, edged a little closer to him. It's odd isn't it, she continued, then looking to the woollen sky—how when we're up a bit, say like here, or higher on a high rise, or up in the air in a plane, how we only want to leap out and fall down. Yet, when we're down there, here, we're always looking up. Wishing to be higher. Wishing to be up there with the birds or at night be among the stars.

Deene leant out over the railing and then leaning back seemed to be closer

to her. As if he'd made the movement to hide a shifting. Then again, maybe he had always been that close. Their shoulders touched. A light electricity that made her whole arm tingle. All he had to do was put his arm around her. Hold her close.

You're right, he said and then took a moment, concentrated. He seemed to shiver. I think it's about wanting to be free, to be simple, to be like God. To be with him and feel his love. But when we're up there with him, when we're so close, we feel unworthy, like we don't belong.

At his mention of God an invisible ingrained dagger of disgust twisted within her. Ané pulled away from him. I don't think it has anything to do with God, she said. —Or wanting to be like God or belonging with God. How can you still believe in that slave doctrine?

Slave doctrine? he answered her defensively. God is love and God is freedom. How can you not believe?

There is no God, she said. It was exploration, curiosity, wanting more than we have—

yes, but—

—that brought us here. Not being content to stay in one spot, to be better—

—don't be so naive, Ané, we—

—did you know someone swam this Ocean? All the way from America to France. You think God made that happen? You think God commanded the riots? For women and children to be raped, unborn babies to be cut from their mother's wombs? Or is that where you draw the line? The evil that men do.

—God is all, he said stepping to her, his blue eyes wanting. Knows the end from the beginning. But when the child sins, do we blame the father? We did this to ourselves.

Oh, you're one of those, are you?

What is that supposed to mean? he said, straightening up.

You think it was preventable, don't you? she said. If only this. If only that.

If only we'd been content to settle into mundane complacency and just go to work, fuck and reproduce, by *godly*, keep the whole shit show going.

You don't know what you're talking about.

I can't believe after everything, after all of the suffering you still think there's order to this, worse, that up there some sadist wants us to go through this, that we deserve it.

Well, don't we? In some way?

For the world to fucking end?

What have we done right, Ané? he said, impassioned. Genocide? War? Global warming? The world was wrong well before you were born. If not this way, then some other way. It was all money, economics. Sectarianism. We saw children covered in rubble, washed ashore dead on beaches in the Middle East, the politicisation of the holy land. The birth place of Christ bought with blood. And the only response? Tweets, likes and shares on social media. Any horror forgotten within the 24-hour news cycle.

What bullshit! she said and vehemently pointed at him. You know who you sound like?

Go on, tell me.

The Crimson Fucking Moon.

I think that's Ané enough. You're drunk.

Don't give what is holy to dogs. A bad tree cannot bear good fruit, she said with contempt, began chanting the words to him. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit. Don't throw pearls before pigs. For God so loved the world he gave his only son. Don't give what is holy to dogs or throw pearls before pigs. A bad tree cannot bear good fruit—

Stop it—

—a good tree cannot bear bad fruit.

Mother Mary, he said under his breath and crossed his chest. May the saints judge the world.

And hearing these words she took slow cautious steps back from him.

You're so young, Ané. You don't know what you're speaking of. The end, this is what we made, this is our field of blood.

And then for Ané it all came together, an answer to a question she hadn't asked but now seemed inevitable.

You're not going to France, are you? she said.

No—What? You're misunderstanding me, he said, staring at her intently, seeming to expand with each deep breath. He wavered. She had to get away.

In another step back, Ané felt her hand on the balcony rail and then turned to dash, saw herself running inside and up the aisle and then the stairs, to the bar where she knew Peter would be. But when she made to catch up with her intention she found her arm was holding her back.

Please, let me explain, he said, clutching her wrist, pulling her to him.

You're hurting me, she said and he let her go, held his hands up.

Please, just—

She leapt and was off towards the doorway, felt the yellow light warm on her face and she was about to be there, further from him, closer to safety, but then her coat, no, her feet weren't where they needed to be, no, she was toppling, on the floor, he was on her, heavy, no, smelled somehow of milk. Help! she screamed.

The dizzying benched seats and empty aisles watched her struggle indifferently. The rumble of the diesel engine, the far wash of the irrepressible swell, the harsh spray she saw curling around her, around the Lollipop, sinking them both into violent undulations soon to be forgotten by all but the deep. His breath was hot and thick in her ear, Look, stop, he said, the words a temptation.

Help!

He pulled her up and she tried kicking at him, but he held, he lifted her with him and then pushed her out to the balcony where her small frame

crashed against the handrail hard, knocking the wind from her lungs. As if entwined together, his motion followed her, fell on her again, all of his weight pinning her on the balustrade. He shoved her harder against the steel and clutched her throat with his hand, the other held her tight around her waist as if a giants grasp, there was the fear of death in his eyes. You need to stop this, now, he said through clenched teeth.

You're a monster, she rasped and spat in his face.

Yellow backlight, a halo, his hair a crown of thorns. He lifted his hand to have both around her throat and she remembered what her father had taught her; defensive strikes, martial moves from the military. Ané focussed all of her fading strength, lined the action in her mind of what to do and then brought her knee hard into his groin and then slid around him, her fists onto his head now going down and she was free. She pushed, kicked at his falling bulk but found all of her air and energy gone. Just run, scream, she told herself. But when she tried screaming there was nothing. She tried running and started to move but her legs didn't step right and she fell over, hitting her temple hard on the edge of the slatted seat and she was on the floor, everything swaying and foggy and wet. Throbbing, paralysing. Time slowed and for a moment she wondered if she was still on her stretcher across from Corrie snoring, dreaming but undreaming. Held in some slow limbo. Her nails scratched and found the timber of the seat and she pulled, scraped herself along the floor. Just crawl.

His shadow shakily rose to stand and loomed over her scrambling away. He moved towards her but in a sequence of timing, one of her crawling kicks slipped and stuck out under his gait, and he tripped and fell and was on her again, crushing all of the hope she had left out of her as if hope was only a breath, breathing. He turned her over, lifted himself up and lay a forearm across her throat.

They were at eyes. His pupils a dark chasm and she began crying.

I'm sorry, he said, and Ané saw he was crying too.

And then he fell away beside her on the coated floor, his breathing short and sharp and she rolled onto her belly, numb, began crawling again, coughing away from him towards the door, she could do this. The crashing ocean. The smell of petrol consumed, consuming. The world sliding by and then he lifted her and pulled off her coat and she was just blood and hair and pyjamas and she didn't fight back. The drama. Blooms of whitewater here and there. A dull ache in her belly. Why wasn't anybody coming?

You're a monster. You are all monsters.

And he twisted her around to face him and he looked very old now, a skeletal ghoul of hair and blind hatred and in one strained heaving effort he lifted her up and onto the railing and then threw her over the edge and for a moment before she hit the water she felt the air rush up and surround her as if she was a baby again being swaddled for the first time.

\*\*\* Dream On \*\*\*

On the console Jean taps her fingernails anxiously in a staccato rhythm. To the dials as stars she exhales in a sigh. Ceylan's voice sings across the intercom: Juno diagnostics complete, she says, no breaches. Critical and non-critical signal paths are sound and functioning without issue, over.

Dragan floats onscreen, his white form moving in short aerosol bursts over to the Sirius' dark hull. Jean, he says. Please provide a status on the separation of Tower Four, do you copy?

She stops tapping and responds, Copy that, and swipes on her console screen, enlarging a thumbnail diagram of the tower with the eight breakers highlighted in red. I'm ready to initialise on your command, over.

Attaching himself to the ship with a carabiner, Dragan gives a thumbs up. Engage, he says and shortly after she begins:

Separation in ten, nine, eight,  
seven, six, five,  
four, three,  
two,  
one.

And with a loud groan and then a vibration within the control room, the base of the black ruined tower explodes onscreen in a cloud of steam-like vapour that quickly expands in a sphere and then dissipates. The giant ribs of the opposing flanges gradually come apart and the tower leans, falls. The action reminds Jean of when the Battersea power station had been demolished; Tower Four like one of the quad smokestacks as it pitches further and further and then begins floating away from the *Sirrius* as if in slow motion. The tower continues to lever downward and looks as if it might swing around completely and possibly hit the ship.

Dragan notices and orders Ceylan to engage the gravity shield and direct the tower out and into a deteriorating orbit. Meanwhile Jean scans readings of the attitude sensors across the *Sirrius* for abnormal drift and in a thumbnail watches like the burial of *Spock* on *Genesis* Tower Four gently float away and sink down as if at the hands of an invisible conductor. After a time and with the sensors returning positional readings within tolerance of what she estimated, Jean announces:

Tower Four is now in the process of re-entry, we are all clear.

She knows now all that is left is to proceed to Checkpoint Two and then launch on their journey out of the solar system and towards Atrus, but that between these two points—now and then—there is over two years of waiting and a lot could happen. In the hope of cheering not only herself up, she adds: Come on inside Captain. Let's get this party started, over.

Jetting over to the open flange where Tower Four had only moments before been connected, Dragan calls across the intercom, I like it, and then repeats her words: Let's get this party started. Onscreen Jean watches as he disappears down and into the open socket. Shortly after, he confirms he is through the airlock and back inside, and as if all *that* (the explosion; Handi's injury; the separation) had all been just a brief interlude, a detour, he orders for Jean to resume their mission.

From Checkpoint Two, just beyond the orbit of the Moon, they engage the gravity drives and accelerate to 20 percent of light speed; some 60,000 kilometres per second. Later when they are out of the solar system they will accelerate to 90 percent. The experience comes to Jean not as a sudden jolt but as a gradual lifting of weight from the whole of her body. A draining of something from extremity to core as if through her heart the components of atoms which gave her mass—gave her presence—were leaving; escaping to some other dimension. A feeling she can only rationalise as being *different* to before, a change acutely felt but impossible to put definitive words to. And effortlessly, smoothly, Sirrius glides, following the trajectory Juno had charted for them.

Watching the dots of pixels, the digital recreation of stars slide across her screen, Jean notes from the orbital chart thumbnail how fast they are approaching the path of Mars, that in only a quarter of an hour a trip that historically would have taken up to a year will be gone and passed. She places her feet on the pedals, wraps her hands around the joysticks and prepares for manual control. She is the *Last Starfighter* and soon they will be crossing the asteroid belt between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter to fight the *Ko-Dan*. She dares, she turns, she banks Sirrius around giant boulders the size of cities, she annihilates *Xur* and saves the galaxy...

—But then a polite chirp from Juno onscreen, a pin-prick yellow star grows and she realises it is Saturn: In her daydreaming, nightdreaming, spaceship-pilot-whateverdreaming, they had travelled faster than she anticipated and crossed the asteroid belt already. The sound—she realises—was Juno confirming their safe passage through without incident.

Ugh, she groans and releases the controls somewhat disappointed, thinks to herself: *Bloody Computers*. But then she sees on her readouts the skyrocketing numbers counting their distance from Earth and marvels at the

speed: 500 million kilometres from Earth (3.3AU) then 525 million kilometres (3.5AU) then 550 million (3.66AU), 575 million (3.83AU). On the orbital chart she watches as they cross the invisible curved path of Jupiter's Orbital trajectory, noting the icon representing the striped gaseous leviathan of the void far on the opposite side of the sun. She swipes onscreen and selecting two points confirms a distance and to spite Juno calculates the travel time in her head, reduces the massive numbers, applies simple arithmetic. It will be another seventeen hours and 24 minutes before they arrive at the Kuiper Belt where this time she tells herself she will take over manual control and save *Rylos*.

In the observation room, they sit on the stools and lean their backs against the far wall and through the observation window which consumes one entire side of the room watch the hulking planet of Saturn and its dual rings spin slowly away.

It's weird, isn't it? Jean says.

The spinning of the Hab? asks Ceylan with a tin cup in her hand which she doesn't sip from, just looks at when not following the passing Saturn.

—That we're leaving, Jean says.

I guess, says Ceylan.

How do you mean? says Dragan, crossing a leg atop his other leg at the ankle.

I know we're leaving, Jean says untying, adjusting and re-tying her curled hair. I know I'm here. I know I'm relying on Juno to deliver me oxygen and that if something—anything goes any more wrong than it already has, we are proper fucked and that's the end of it for all of us, for everyone. But it just doesn't *feel* like it's happening like that. Like when a relative once removed or something dies and you hear about it over the phone, and you go to the funeral and see the photo and you know it's them and you know you'll never

see them again, and it's sad and all that. But it just doesn't feel like that's what's happened to them. Like growing old: Day after day you feel mostly the same, it's the same you inside your head, the same one thinking: I might have a cigarette; or, I might have a cup of water; or, I think I might channel *Melville* and think about the colour white for a bit; and then one day you're looking at your fiftieth birthday and it's the end of the world. And even the way I'm saying it just now, you would think it was funny if it wasn't true. Every day it's getting closer. If it wasn't for us being here and doing this, we'd probably be back on Earth hoping it was all a lie, pretending it's just something to worry about later, something that will only happen to someone else. But here we are watching Saturn and its sixty-two moons, we're seeing with our own eyes Enceladus, Titan, Rhea, Mimas, Tethys, Dione and Lapetus, the twenty metre thick sheets of water ice, tholin and carbon which ring the planet, glide by. We are travelling on a spaceship faster than any human has ever travelled, on our way out of the solar system to save humanity. She pauses. And I know Handi might die. We all might die. She rubs her forehead gently. But it doesn't feel that way. There's a disconnect. Well isn't there?

Ceylan finally sips at her tin cup and asks, What you think you are supposed to feel?