

In fourteen hundred and ninety two
Columbus sailed the ocean blue.

And then what? She couldn't remember. All those years ago, obedient ten-year-olds with arms crossed, they had chanted it back to the mistress. All except Eric Dooley who sat behind her and chewed her pigtail. Once she'd been asked to get up and recite the next two lines but she was only a few inches out of her seat when her head snapped back and the class laughed. Eric was hanging on to her plait with his teeth. Perhaps that was why she could never remember the next two lines.

She remembered the reindeer well enough, though. It all began with the reindeer, which flew through the air at Christmas. She was a girl who believed what she was told, and the reindeer flew.

She must have seen them first on a Christmas card. Six, eight, ten of them, harnessed side by side. She always imagined that each pair was man and wife, a happy couple, like the animals that went into the Ark. That would be right wouldn't it, that would be natural? But her Dad said you could tell from the antlers that the reindeer pulling the sleigh were stags. At first she only felt disappointed, but later resentment grew. Father Christmas ran an all-male team. Typical. Absolutely bloody typical, she thought.

They flew, that was the point. She didn't believe that Father Christmas squeezed down the chimney and left presents at the end of your bed, but she did believe that the reindeer flew. People tried to argue her out of it, they said if you believe that you'll believe anything. However, she was fourteen now,

short-haired and stubborn, and she always had her reply ready. No, she would say, if only you could believe that the reindeer can fly, then you'd realize anything is possible. Anything.

Around that time she went to the zoo. It was their horns that fascinated her. They were all silky, as if they'd been covered with some posh material from a smart shop. They looked like branches in some forest where nobody had trodden for centuries; soft, sheeny, mossy branches. She imagined a sloping bit of wood with a gentle light and some fallen nuts cracking beneath her foot. Yeah, and a cottage made out of gingerbread at the end of the path, said her best friend Sandra when she told her. No, she thought, the antlers turn into branches, the branches into antlers. Everything's connected, and the reindeer *can* fly.

She saw them fighting once, on television. They butted and raged at one another, charged headlong, tangled horns. They fought so hard they rubbed the skin off their antlers. She thought that underneath there'd be just dry bone, and their horns would look like winter branches stripped of their bark by hungry animals. But it wasn't like that. Not at all. They bled. The skin was torn off and underneath was blood as well as bone. The antlers turned scarlet and white, standing out in the soft greens and browns of the landscape like a tray of bones at the butcher's. It was horrible, she thought, yet we ought to face it. Everything *is* connected, even the parts we don't like, especially the parts we don't like.

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She watched the television a lot after the first big accident. It wasn't a very serious accident, they said, not really, not like a bomb going off. And anyway it was a long way away, in Russia, and they didn't have proper modern power stations over there like we do, and even if they did their safety standards were obviously much lower so it couldn't happen here and there wasn't anything to worry about, was there? It might even teach the Russians a lesson, people said. Make them think twice about dropping the big one.

In a strange way people were excited by it. Something bigger than the latest unemployment figures or the price of a stamp. Besides, most of the nasty things were happening to other people. There was a cloud of poison, and everyone tracked its course like they'd follow the drift of quite an interesting area of low pressure on the weather map. For a while people stopped buying milk, and asked the butcher where the meat came from. But soon they stopped worrying, and forgot about it all.

At first the plan had been to bury the reindeer six feet down. It wasn't much of a news story, just an inch or two on the foreign page. The cloud had gone over where the reindeer grazed, poison had come down in the rain, the lichen became radioactive, the reindeer had eaten the lichen and got radioactive themselves. What did I tell you, she thought, everything is connected.

People couldn't understand why she got so upset. They said she shouldn't be sentimental, and after all it wasn't as if she had to live off reindeer meat, and if she had some spare sympathy going shouldn't she save it for human beings? She tried to explain, but she wasn't very good at explaining and they didn't understand. The ones who thought they understood said, Yes, we see, it's all about your childhood and the silly romantic ideas you had when you were a kid, but you can't go on having silly romantic ideas all your life, you've got to grow up in the end, you've got to be realistic, please don't cry, no maybe that's a good idea, here, have a good cry, it'll probably be good for you in the long run. No, it's not like that, she said, it's not like that at all. Then cartoonists started making jokes, about how the reindeer were so gleaming with radioactivity that Father Christmas didn't need headlights on his sleigh, and Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer had a very shiny nose because he came from Chernobyl; but she didn't think it was funny.

Listen, she'd tell people. The way they measure the level of radioactivity is in something called becquerels. When the accident happened the Norwegian government had to decide what amount of radiation in meat was safe, and they came up with a figure of 600 becquerels. But people didn't like the idea

of their meat being poisoned, and the Norwegian butchers didn't do such good business, and the one sort of meat no-one would buy was reindeer, which was hardly surprising. So this is what the government did. They said that as people obviously weren't going to eat reindeer very often because they were so scared, then it would be just as safe for them to eat meat that was more contaminated every once in a while as to eat less contaminated meat more often. So they raised the permitted limit for reindeer meat to 6,000 becquerels. Hey presto! One day it's harmful to eat meat with 600 becquerels in it, the next day it's safe with ten times that amount. This only applied to reindeer, of course. At the same time it's still officially dangerous to eat a pork chop or scrag end of lamb with 601 becquerels in it.

One of the TV programmes showed a couple of Lapp farmers bringing a reindeer corpse in for inspection. This was just after the limit had been raised ten times. The official from the Department of whatever it was, Agriculture or something, chopped up the little bits of reindeer innards and did the usual tests on them. The reading came out at 42,000 becquerels. 42 thousand.

At first the plan was to bury them, six feet down. Still, there's nothing like a good disaster to get people thinking clever thoughts. *Bury* the reindeer? No, that makes it look as if there's been a problem, like something's actually gone wrong. There must be a more useful way of disposing of them. You couldn't feed the meat to humans, so why not feed it to animals? That's a good idea — but which animals? Obviously not the sort which end up getting eaten by humans, we've got to protect number one. So they decided to feed it to the mink. What a clever idea. Mink aren't supposed to be very nice, and anyway the sort of people who can afford mink coats probably don't mind a little dose of radioactivity on top of it. Like a dash of scent behind the ears or something. Rather chic, really.

Most people had stopped paying attention to what she was telling them by now, but she always carried on. Listen, she said, so instead of burying the reindeer they're now painting a big blue stripe down the carcasses and feeding them to mink. I think

they should have buried them. Burying things gives you a proper sense of shame. Look what we've done to the reindeer, they'd say as they dug the pit. Or they might, at least. They might think about it. Why are we always punishing animals? We pretend we like them, we keep them as pets and get sappy if we think they're reacting like us, but we've been punishing animals from the beginning, haven't we? Killing them and torturing them and throwing our guilt on to them?

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She gave up eating meat after the accident. Every time she found a slice of beef on her plate or a spoonful of stew she thought of reindeer. The poor beasts with their horns stripped bare and all bloody from fighting. Then the row of carcasses each with a stripe of blue paint down its back, clanking past on a row of shiny hooks.

That, she explained, was when she first came here. Down south, that is. People said she was silly, she was running away, wasn't being realistic, if she felt that strongly about things she ought to stay and argue against them. But it depressed her too much. People didn't listen enough to her arguments. Besides, you should always go where you believe the reindeer can fly: *that* was being realistic. They couldn't fly up in the north any more.

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I wonder what's happened to Greg. I wonder if he's safe. I wonder what he thinks about me, now he knows I was right. I hope he doesn't hate me for it. Men often hate you for being right. Or perhaps he'll pretend nothing has even happened; that way he can be sure he was right. Yes, it wasn't what you thought, it was just a comet burning out in the sky, or a summer storm, or a hoax on TV. Silly cow.

Greg was an ordinary bloke. Not that I wanted anything different when I met him. He went to work, came home, sat around, drank beer, went out with his mates and drank some more beer, sometimes slapped me around a bit on pay-night. We got on fair enough. Argued about Paul, of course. Greg said

I ought to get him fixed so he'd be less aggressive and stop scratching the furniture. I said it wasn't anything to do with that, all cats scratched the furniture, maybe we should get him a scratching pole. Greg said how did I know that wouldn't encourage him, like giving him permission to scratch everything a whole lot more? I said don't be daft. He said it was scientifically proved that if you castrate cats they're less aggressive. I said wasn't the opposite more likely - that if you mutilated them it'd make them angry and violent? Greg picked up this big pair of scissors and said well why don't we bloody find out then? I screamed.

I wouldn't let him have Paul fixed, even if he did mess up the furniture quite a bit. Later I remembered something. They castrate reindeer, you know. The Lapps do. They pick out a big stag and castrate it and that makes it tame. Then they hang a bell round its neck and this bell-bull as they call it leads the rest of the reindeer around, wherever the herdsmen decide they want them to go. So the idea probably does work, but I still think it's wrong. It's not a cat's fault that it's a cat. I didn't tell any of this to Greg of course, about the bell-bulls. Sometimes, when he slapped me around, I'd think, maybe we ought to get you fixed first, that might make you less aggressive. But I never did say it. It wouldn't have helped.

We used to row about animals. Greg thought I was soft. Once I told him they were turning all the whales into soap. He laughed and said that was a bloody good way of using them up. I burst into tears. I suppose as much because he could think of something like that as because he said it.

We didn't row about the Big Thing. He just said politics was men's business and I didn't know what I was talking about. That was as far as our conversations about the extinction of the planet went. If I said I was worried what America might do if Russia didn't back down or vice versa, or the Middle East or whatever, he said did I think it might be pre-menstrual tension. You can't talk to anyone like that, can you? He wouldn't even discuss it, wouldn't row about it. Once I said maybe it *was* pre-menstrual tension, and he said yes I thought so. I said no,

listen, maybe women are more in touch with the world. He said what did I mean, and I said, well, everything's connected, isn't it, and women are more closely connected to all the cycles of nature and birth and rebirth on the planet than men, who are only impregnators after all when it comes down to it, and if women are in tune with the planet then maybe if terrible things are going on up in the north, things which threaten the whole existence of the planet, then maybe women get to feel these things, like the way some people know earthquakes are coming, and perhaps that's what sets off PMT. He said silly cow, that's just why politics is men's business, and got another beer out of the fridge. A few days later he said to me, what happened about the end of the world? I just looked at him and he said, as far as I can see all that pre-menstrual tension you had was about the fact that you were getting your period. I said you make me so angry I almost want the end of the world to come just so you'll be proved wrong. He said he was sorry, but what did he know, after all he was just an impregnator as I'd pointed out, and he reckoned those other impregnators up in the north would sort something out.

Sort something out? That's what the plumber says, or the man who comes to nail the roof back on. 'Reckon we'll be able to sort something out,' they say with one of those confident winks. Well, they didn't sort something out on this occasion, did they? They bloody didn't. And in the last days of the crisis, Greg didn't always come home at nights. Even he'd finally noticed and decided to have some fun before it was all over. In a way I couldn't blame him, except for the fact that he wouldn't admit it. He said he was staying out because he couldn't stand coming home and getting nagged at by me. I told him I understood and it was all right, yet when I explained he got very uptight. He said if he wanted a bit on the side then it wouldn't be because of the world situation but because I was on his back all the time. They just don't see the connections, do they? When men in dark-grey suits and striped ties up there in the north start taking certain strategic precautions as they term it, men like Greg in thongs and T-shirts down here in the south begin staying out

late in bars trying to pick up girls. They should understand that, shouldn't they? They should admit it.

So when I knew what had happened, I didn't wait for Greg to come home. He was out there knocking back another beer, saying how those fellows up there would sort something out, and in the meantime why don't you come and sit on my knee, darling? I just took Paul and put him in his basket and got on the bus with as much tinned food as I could carry and some bottles of water. I didn't leave a note because there wasn't anything to say. I got off at the terminal on Harry Chan Avenue and started walking towards the Esplanade. Then guess what I saw, sunning herself on the roof of a car? A sleepy, friendly, tortoiseshell cat. I stroked her, she purred, I sort of scooped her up in my arm, one or two people stopped to look but I was round the corner into Herbert Street before they could say anything.

Greg would have been angry about the boat. Still, he only had a quarter share in her, and if the four of them were going to spend their last days drinking in bars and picking up girls because of the men in dark-grey suits who in my opinion should have been fixed themselves years ago, then they weren't going to miss the boat, were they? I filled her up, and as I cast off I saw that the tortoiseshell I'd put down just anywhere was sitting on top of Paul's basket, looking at me. 'You'll be Linda,' I said.

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She left the world behind from a place called Doctor's Gully. At the end of the Esplanade at Darwin, behind the modern YMCA building, a zig-zag road runs down to a disused boat ramp. The big hot car-park is mostly empty, except when tourists come to watch the fish feed. Nothing else goes on nowadays at Doctor's Gully. Every day at high tide hundreds, thousands of fish come right up to the water's edge to be fed.

She thought how trusting the fish were. They must think these huge two-legged creatures are giving them food out of the kindness of their hearts. Maybe that's how it started, but now it's \$2.50 admission for adults, \$1.50 for children. She wondered why none of the tourists who stayed in the big hotels

along the Esplanade thought it odd. But nobody stops to think about the world any more. We live in a world where they make children pay to see the fish eat. Nowadays even fish are exploited, she thought. Exploited, and then poisoned. The ocean out there is filling up with poison. The fish will die too.

Doctor's Gully was deserted. Hardly anyone sailed from there any more; they'd all moved off to the marina years ago. But there were still a couple of boats pulled up on the rocks, looking abandoned. One of them, pink and grey, with not much of a mast, had NOT FOR SALE painted along its side. This always made her laugh. Greg and his friends kept their little boat behind this one, away from the fish-feeding place. The rocks over here were strewn with discarded bits of metal - engines, boilers, valves, pipes, all turning orangey-brown with rust. As she walked, she stirred up flocks of orangey-brown butterflies which had started to live among the scrap metal, using it as camouflage. What have we done to the butterflies, she thought; look where we've made them live. She gazed out to sea, across the scrubby bits of mangrove pushing up by the shore, towards a line of small tankers, and beyond them low, humpy islands on the horizon. This was the place from which she left the world behind.

Past Melville Island, through Dundas Strait, and out into the Arafura Sea; after that she let the wind govern her direction. Mostly they seemed to be heading east, but she didn't attend too carefully. You only followed where you were going if you wanted to get back to where you had started from, and she knew that was impossible.

She hadn't expected neat mushroom clouds on the horizon. She knew it wouldn't be like it was in the films. Sometimes there was a shifting of the light, sometimes a distant rumbling noise. Such things could have meant nothing at all; but somewhere it had happened, and the winds that circled the planet were doing the rest. At night she slackened sail and went below to the little cabin, leaving the deck to Paul and Linda. At first Paul had wanted to fight the newcomer - all the old

territorial stuff. But after a day or two the cats became accustomed to one another.

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She thought she might have caught the sun a little. She'd been out in the heat all day with only one of Greg's old baseball caps for protection. He had this collection of stupid caps with silly slogans on them. This one was red with white lettering on it, an advertisement for a restaurant somewhere. It read UNTIL YOU'VE ATE AT BJ'S YOU AIN'T SHIT. Some drinking mate of Greg's had given it him for a birthday, and Greg could never tire of the joke. He'd sit there on the boat with a can of beer in his hand and his cap on his head and just start chuckling to himself. Then he'd laugh a lot more until everyone was watching, and finally announce 'Until you've ate at BJ's you ain't shit.' That would crack him up, time and again. She hated the cap but it made sense to wear it. She'd forgotten the zinc cream and all the other tubes of stuff.

She knew what she was doing. She knew probably nothing would come of what Greg would have referred to as her little venture. Whenever she had a plan of any sort - especially something that didn't involve him - he would always refer to it as her little venture. She didn't think she was going to land on some undamaged island where you only had to throw a bean over your shoulder for a row of them to spring up and wave their pods at you. She didn't expect a coral reef, a strip of sand from the holiday brochures, and a nodding palm. She didn't imagine some good-looking fellow turning up after a couple of weeks in a dinghy with two dogs on board; then a girl with two chickens, a bloke with two pigs, and so on. Her expectations were not high. She just thought you had to try it, whatever the result. It was your duty. You weren't allowed to get out of it.

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I couldn't tell last night. I was coming out of a dream, or maybe I was still in it, but I heard the cats, I swear I did. Or rather, the sound of a cat on heat, calling. Not that Linda would have had

far to call. By the time I was fully awake there was only the sound of the waves against the hull. I went up the steps and pushed open the doors. In the moonlight I could see the pair of them, sitting smugly on their paws, side by side, looking back at me. Just like a couple of kids who'd almost got caught necking by the girl's mum. A cat on heat sounds like a baby crying, doesn't it? That ought to tell us something.

I don't keep count of the days. There isn't any point, is there? We aren't going to measure things in days any more. Days and weekends and holidays - that's how the men in grey suits measure things. We'll have to go back to some older cycle, sunrise to sunset for a start, and the moon will come into it, and the seasons, and the weather - the new, terrible weather we shall have to live under. How do tribes in the jungle measure the days? It's not too late to learn from them. People like that have the key to living with nature. They wouldn't castrate their cats. They might worship them, they might even eat them, but they wouldn't have them fixed.

I just eat enough to keep me going. I'm not going to calculate how long I might be at sea and then divide the rations into forty-eight portions or anything like that. That's the old sort of thinking, the thinking that led us into all this. I eat enough to keep going, that's all. I fish, of course. I'm sure it's safe. But when I catch something I can't help giving it to Paul and Linda. Still tins for me, while the cats grow plump.

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I must be more careful. Must have passed out in the sun. Came to lying on my back with the cats licking my face. Felt very parched and feverish. Too much tinned food, perhaps. Next time I catch a fish I'd better eat it myself, even if it makes me unpopular.

I wonder what Greg's up to. Is he up to anything? I sort of see him there, with a beer in his hand, laughing and pointing. 'Until you've ate at BJ's you aint shit,' he says. He's reading it off my cap, staring at me. He's got a girl on his knee. My life

with Greg seems as far away from me now as my life in the north.

I saw a flying fish the other day. I'm sure I did. I couldn't have made it up, could I? It made me happy. Fish can fly, and so can reindeer.

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Definitely got some fever. Managed to catch a fish and even cook it. Big trouble from Paul and Linda. Dreams, bad dreams. Still heading more or less east, I think.

I'm sure I'm not alone. I mean, I'm sure everywhere in the world there are people like me. It can't be just me, just me alone in a boat with two cats and everyone else on dry land shouting silly cow. I bet there are hundreds, thousands of boats with people in and animals doing what I'm doing. Abandon ship, that was the old cry. Now it's abandon land. There's danger everywhere, but more on land. We all crawled out of the sea once, didn't we? Maybe that was a mistake. Now we're going back to it.

I imagine all the other people doing what I'm doing and that gives me hope. It must be an instinct in the human race, mustn't it? When threatened, scatter. Not just running away from the danger, but raising our chances of survival as a species. If we spread out over the whole globe, the poison won't be able to harm everyone. Even if they fired off all their poison, there must be a chance.

In the night I hear the cats. A hopeful sound.

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Bad dreams. Nightmares, I suppose. When does a dream become a nightmare? These dreams of mine go on after I've woken up. It's like having a hangover. The bad dreams won't let the rest of life go on.

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She thought she saw another boat on the horizon, and steered towards it. She didn't have any flares, and it was too far away for

shouting, so she just steered towards it. It was sailing parallel to the horizon, and she had it in view for half an hour or so. Then it went away. Perhaps it wasn't a boat anyway, she said to herself; but whatever it was, its disappearance left her feeling depressed.

She remembered a terrible thing she'd once read in a newspaper story about life on board a supertanker. Nowadays the ships had got bigger and bigger, while the crew had got smaller and smaller, and everything was done by technology. They just programmed a computer in the Gulf or wherever, and the ship practically sailed itself all the way to London or Sydney. It was much nicer for the owners, who saved lots of money, and much nicer for the crew, who only had to worry about the boredom. Most of the time they sat around below deck drinking beer like Greg, as far as she could make out. Drinking beer and watching videos.

There was one thing she couldn't ever forget from the article. It said that in the old days there was always someone up in the crew's nest or on the bridge, watching for trouble. But nowadays the big ships didn't have a lookout any more, or at least the lookout was just a man staring from time to time at a screen with a lot of blips on it. In the old days if you were lost at sea in a raft or a dinghy or something, and a boat came along, there was a pretty good chance of being rescued. You waved and shouted and fired off any rockets you had; you ran your shirt up to the top of the mast; and there were always people keeping an eye out for you. Nowadays you can drift in the ocean for weeks, and a supertanker finally comes along, and it goes right past. The radar won't pick you up because you're too small, and it's pure luck if anybody happens to be hanging over the rail being sick. There had been lots of cases where castaways who would have been rescued in the old days simply weren't picked up; and even incidents of people being run down by the ships they thought were coming to rescue them. She tried to imagine how awful it would be, the terrible wait, and then the feeling as the ship goes past and there's nothing you can do, all your shouts drowned by the engines. That's what's wrong with the world, she thought. We've given up having lookouts. We don't think about saving

other people, we just sail on by relying on our machines. Everyone's below deck, having a beer with Greg.

So maybe that ship on the horizon wouldn't have spotted her anyway. Not that she wanted to be rescued or anything. There just might have been some news about the world, that was all.

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She began to have more nightmares. The bad dreams hung over longer into the day. She felt she was on her back. There was a pain in her arm. She was wearing white gloves. She was in a sort of cage, as far as she could tell: on either side of her metal bars rose vertically. Men came and saw her, always men. She thought she must write down the nightmares, write them down as well as the true things that were happening. She told the men in the nightmares that she was going to write about them. They smiled and said they would give her a pencil and paper. She refused. She said she would use her own.

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She knew the cats were getting a good diet of fish. She knew they didn't get much exercise and were putting on weight. But it just seemed to her that Linda was putting on more weight than Paul. She didn't like to believe it was happening. She didn't dare.

One day she saw land. She started the engine and steered towards it. She got close enough to see mangroves and palms, then the fuel ran out and the winds carried her away. It was a surprise to find no sadness or disappointment within her as the island receded. In any case, she thought, it would have been cheating to find the new land with the help of a diesel engine. The old ways of doing things had to be rediscovered: the future lay in the past. She would allow the winds to guide and guard her. She threw the empty fuel cans overboard.

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I'm crazy. I should have got pregnant before I left. Of course. How didn't I see that was the answer? All these jokes from Greg

about him being just an impregnator and I couldn't see what was obvious. That was what he was there for. That's why I met him. All that side of things seems odd now. Bits of rubber and tubes to squeeze and pills to swallow. There won't be any of that any more. We're going to give ourselves back to nature now.

I wonder where Greg is; *whether* Greg is. He could be dead. I've always wondered about that phrase the survival of the fittest. Anyone would think, looking at us, that Greg was the fittest to survive: he's bigger, stronger, more practical in our terms anyway, more conservative, more easy-going. I'm a worrier, I've never done carpentry, I'm not so good at being on my own. But I'm the one that's going to survive, or have the chance to anyway. The Survival of the Worriers — is that what it means? People like Greg will die out like the dinosaurs. Only those who can see what's happening will survive, that must be the rule. I bet there were animals who sensed the Ice Age was coming and set off on some long and dangerous journey to find a safer, warmer climate. And I bet the dinosaurs thought they were neurotic, put it down to pre-menstrual tension, said, Silly cow. I wonder if the reindeer saw what was going to happen to them. Do you think they ever sensed it somehow?

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They say I don't understand things. They say I'm not making the right connections. Listen to them, listen to them and their connections. This happened, they say, and as a consequence that happened. There was a battle here, a war there, a king was deposed, famous men — always famous men, I'm sick of famous men — made events happen. Maybe I've been out in the sun too long, but I can't see their connections. I look at the history of the world, which they don't seem to realize is coming to an end, and I don't see what they see. All I see is the old connections, the ones we don't take any notice of any more because that makes it easier to poison the reindeer and paint stripes down their backs and feed them to mink. Who made that happen? Which famous man will claim the credit for that?

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It's laughable. Listen to this dream. I was in bed, and I couldn't move. Things were a bit blurry. I didn't know where I was. There was a man. I don't remember what he looked like — just a man. He said, 'How are you feeling?'

I said, 'I'm fine.'

'Are you really?'

'Of course I am. Why shouldn't I be?'

He didn't reply, just nodded, and seemed to be looking up and down my body, which was under the bedclothes of course. Then he said, 'None of these urges?'

'What urges?'

'You know what I'm talking about.'

'Excuse me,' I replied — it's funny how you come over all formal in dreams, where you wouldn't in real life — 'Excuse me, but I really haven't the faintest notion of what it is you are referring to.'

'You've been attacking men.'

'Oh, yes? What was I after, their wallets?'

'No. It seems you were after sex.'

I began to laugh. The man frowned; I can remember the frown even if the rest of his face has gone. 'This really is too transparent,' I said, a frosty actress in an old film. I laughed some more. You know that moment, like a break in the cloud, when you realize inside a dream that you're only dreaming? He frowned again. I said, 'Don't be so obvious.' He didn't like that, and went away.

I woke up grinning to myself. Thinking about Greg and the cats and whether I should have got pregnant, and I have a sex-dream. The mind can be pretty straightforward, can't it? What made it think it could get away with something like that?

I'm stuck with this rhyme as we head in whatever direction we're heading:

In fourteen hundred and ninety two
Columbus sailed the ocean blue

And then what? They always make it sound so simple. Names, dates, achievements. I hate dates. Dates are bullies, dates are know-alls.

She was always confident of reaching the island. She was asleep when the wind brought her there. All she had to do was steer between two knuckles of rock and run the boat aground on some pebbles. There was no perfect sweep of sand ready for the tourist's footprint, no coral breakwater, not even a nodding palm. She was relieved and grateful about this. It was better that the sand was rock, the lush jungle a scrub, the fertile soil a dustheap. Too much beauty, too much verdure might make her forget the rest of the planet.

Paul jumped ashore, but Linda waited to be carried. Yes, she thought, it was time we found land. She decided to sleep in the boat at first. You were supposed to start building a log cabin as soon as you arrived, but that was silly. The island might not prove suitable.

She thought that landing on the island would make the nightmares stop.

It was very hot. Anyone would think the place had central heating, she said to herself. There were no breezes, no change in the weather. She watched over Paul and Linda. They were her consolation.

She wondered if the nightmares were caused by sleeping in the boat, by being cooped up all night after having the freedom to walk around all day. She thought her mind could be protesting, asking to be let out. So she made a little shelter above the tideline and began sleeping there.

This didn't make any difference.

Something terrible was happening to her skin.

The nightmares got worse. She decided this was normal, as far as you could use the word *normal* any more. At least, it was to be expected, given her condition. She had been poisoned. How bad the poison was she didn't know. In her dreams the men were always very polite, even gentle. This was how she knew not to trust them: they were tempters. The mind was producing its own arguments against reality, against itself, what it knew. There was obviously something chemical behind it all, like antibodies or whatever. The mind, being in a state of shock because of what had happened, was creating its own reasons for denying what had happened. She should have expected something like that.

I'll give you an example. I'm quite cunning in my nightmares. When the men come I pretend not to be surprised. I act as if it's normal that they should be there. I call their bluff. Last night we had the following exchange. Make of it what you will.

'Why am I wearing white gloves?' I asked.

'Is that what you think they are?'

'What do you think they are?'

'We had to put a drip in your arm.'

'Is that why I have to wear white gloves? This isn't the opera.'

'They aren't gloves. They're bandages.'

'I thought you said I had a drip in my arm.'

'That's right. The bandages are to hold the drip in place.'

'But I can't move my fingers.'

'That's normal.'

'Normal?' I said. 'What's normal nowadays?' He couldn't find an answer to that, so I carried on. 'Which arm is the drip in?'

'The left. You can see that for yourself.'

'Then why have you bandaged my right arm as well?'

He had to think about that for a long time. Finally he said, 'Because you were trying to pull the drip out with your free arm.'

'Why should I want to do that?'

'I should think only you can tell us.'

I shook my head. He went away defeated. But I gave as good as I got, didn't I? And the next night I took them on again. My mind obviously thought I'd seen off that tempter too easily, so it produced a different one, who kept calling me by name.

'How are you tonight, Kath?'

'I thought you always said *we*. That is, if you're who you pretend you are.'

'Why should I say *we*, Kath? I know how I am. I was asking about you.'

'*We*,' I said sarcastically, 'We in the zoo are fine, thank you very much.'

'What do you mean, the zoo?'

'The bars, stupid. I didn't really think it was a zoo; I wanted to find out what they thought it was. Fighting your own mind isn't always an easy business.'

'The bars? Oh, they're just part of your bed.'

'My bed? Excuse me, so it isn't a cot and I'm not a baby?'

'It's a special bed. Look.' He flicked a catch and folded one set of bars down and out of my sight. Then he pulled them up again and latched them shut.

'Oh, I see, you're locking me up, is that the idea?'

'No, no, no, Kath. We just don't want you to fall asleep and roll out of bed. If you had a nightmare, for instance.'

That was a crafty tactic. *If you had a nightmare . . .* But it would take a lot more than this to trick me. I think I know what my mind is doing. It is a sort of zoo I'm imagining, because a zoo is the only place I've seen reindeer. Live, I mean. So I associate them with bars. My mind knows that for me it all started with the reindeer; that's why it invented this deception. It's very plausible, the mind.

'I don't *have* nightmares,' I said firmly, as if they were spots or something. I thought that was good, telling him he didn't exist.

'Well, in case you started sleep-walking or something.'

'Have I been sleep-walking?'

'We can't watch everybody, Kath. There are many others in the same boat as you.'

'I know!' I shouted. 'I know!' I was shouting because I felt triumphant. He was clever, that one, but he'd given himself away. *In the same boat*. Naturally he meant *in other boats*, but he — or rather my mind — had tripped up.

I slept well that night.

* * *

She had a terrible thought. What if the kittens weren't all right? What if Linda gave birth to freaks, to monsters? Could it happen this soon? What winds had blown them all here, what poison was in those winds?

She seemed to sleep a lot. The flat heat continued. She felt parched much of the time, and drinking from the stream didn't help. Perhaps there was something wrong with the water. Her skin was falling off. She held up her hands and her fingers looked like the antlers of a fighting stag. Her depressions continued. She tried to cheer herself up with the thought that at least she didn't have a boyfriend on the island. What would Greg say if he saw her like this?

* * *

It was the mind, she decided; that was the cause of it all. The mind simply got too clever for its own good, it got carried away. It was the mind that invented these weapons, wasn't it? You couldn't imagine an animal inventing its own destruction, could you?

She told herself the following story. There was a bear in the forest, an intelligent, lively bear, a . . . *normal* bear. One day it started digging a great pit. When it had finished it broke a branch from a tree, pulled off the leaves and twigs, gnawed one end to a sharp point and planted this stake in the bottom of the pit, sticking upwards. Then the bear covered the hole it had dug with branches and undergrowth so that it looked like any other part of the forest floor, and went away. Now where do you think the bear had dug its pit? Right in the middle of one of its own favourite trails, a spot it regularly crossed on its way to drink honey from the trees, or whatever it is bears do. So the next day

the bear lolloped along the path, fell into the pit and got impaled on the stake. As it died it thought, *My, my, this is a surprise, what a curious way things have turned out. Perhaps it was a mistake to dig a trap where I did. Perhaps it was a mistake to dig a trap in the first place.*

You can't imagine a bear doing that, can you? But that's what it's like with us, she reflected. The mind just got carried away. Never knew when to stop. But then the mind never does. It's the same with these nightmares — the sleeping mind just gets carried away. She wondered if primitive people had nightmares. She bet they didn't. Or at least, not the sort we have.

She didn't believe in God, but now she was tempted. Not because she was afraid of dying. It wasn't that. No, she was tempted to believe in someone watching what was going on, watching the bear dig its own pit and then fall into it. It wouldn't be such a good story if there was no-one around to tell it. Look what they went and did — they blew themselves up. Silly cows.

* * *

The one I had the argument with about the gloves was here again. I caught him out.

'I've still got my gloves on,' I said.

'Yes,' he replied, humouring me but getting it wrong.

'I haven't got a drip in my arm.'

He obviously wasn't prepared for that. 'Ah, no.'

'So why am I wearing my white gloves?'

'Ah.' He paused while deciding which lie to tell. It wasn't a bad one he came up with. 'You were pulling your hair out.'

'Nonsense. It's falling out. It falls out every day.'

'No, I'm afraid you were pulling it out.'

'Nonsense. I only have to put my hand to it and it falls out in great hanks.'

'I'm afraid not,' he said patronizingly.

'Go away,' I shouted. 'Go away, go away.'

'Of course.'

And he went. It was a very devious thing he came up with

about my hair, a lie as close to the truth as possible. Because I have been touching my hair. Well, that's not surprising, is it?

Still, it was a good sign that I told him to go and he went. I feel I'm getting on top of things, I'm beginning to control my nightmares. This is just a period I've been going through. I'll be glad when it ends. The next period may be worse, of course, but at least it'll be different. I wish I knew how much I was poisoned. Enough to put a blue stripe down my back and feed me to the mink?

• • • • •
The mind got carried away, she found herself repeating. Everything was connected, the weapons and the nightmares. That's why they'd had to break the cycle. Start making things simple again. Begin at the beginning, People said you couldn't turn the clock back, but you could. The future was in the past.

She wished she could put a stop to the men and their temptations. She thought they would stop when she reached the island. She thought they would stop when she gave up sleeping in the boat. But they only became more persistent and more cunning. At night she was afraid to fall asleep because of the nightmares; yet she needed rest so much, and each morning she woke later and later. The flat heat continued, a stale, institutional heat; it was like being surrounded by radiators. Would it ever end? Perhaps the seasons had been killed off by what had happened, or at least reduced from four to two - that special winter they'd all been warned about, and this unbearable summer. Maybe the world had to earn the spring and autumn back by good behaviour over many centuries.

• • • • •
I don't know which of the men it was. I've started closing my eyes. That's harder than you think. If you've already got your eyes closed in sleep, try closing them again to shut out a nightmare. It's not easy. But if I can learn this, then perhaps I'll be able to learn putting my hands over my ears as well. That would help.

'How are you feeling this morning?'

'Why do you say *morning*? It's always night when you call. You see how I don't let them get away with anything?'

'If you say so.'

'What do you mean, if I say so?'

'You're the boss.' That's right, I am the boss. You've got to keep control of your own mind, otherwise it'll run away with you. And that's what's caused the peril we're in at the moment. Keep the mind under control.

So I answer, 'Go away.'

'You keep saying that.'

'Well if I'm the boss I'm allowed to, aren't I?'

'You'll have to talk about it one day.'

'*Day*. There you go again.' I kept my eyes closed. 'What's it, anyway?' I thought I was still pursuing him, but this may have been a tactical mistake.

'It? Oh, everything . . . How you got yourself into this situation, how we're going to help you get out of it.'

'You really are a very ignorant man, you know that?'

He ignored this. I hate the way they pretend not to have heard the things they can't deal with. 'Greg,' he said, clearly changing the subject. 'Your feelings of guilt, rejection, things like that . . .'

'Is Greg alive?' The nightmare was so real I somehow thought the man might know the answer.

'Greg? Yes, Greg's fine. But we thought it wouldn't help . . .'

'Why should I have guilt feelings? I'm not guilty about taking the boat. He just wanted to drink beer and get off with girls. He didn't need a boat for that.'

'I don't think the boat's central to the matter.'

'What do you mean, not central? I wouldn't be here without the boat.'

'I mean you're offloading a lot on to the boat. So that you can avoid thinking about what happened before the boat. Do you think that's what you might be doing?'

'How would I know? You're meant to be the expert.' This was

very sarcastic of me, I know, but I couldn't resist it. I was angry with him. As if I was ignoring what had happened before I took the boat. I was one of the few people that noticed, after all. The rest of the world behaved like Greg.

'Well, I think we seem to be making some progress
'Go away.'

* * *

I knew he'd be back. In a way I was sort of waiting for him to return. Just to get it over with, I suppose. And he had me intrigued, I'll admit that. I mean, I know exactly what's happened, and more or less why and more or less how. But I wanted to see how clever his — well, my own, really — explanation would be.

'So you think you might be ready to talk about Greg

'Greg? What's it got to do with Greg?'

'Well, it seems to us, and we'd like your confirmation on this one, that your . . . your break-up with Greg has a lot to do with your present . . . problems.'

'You really are a very ignorant man.' I liked saying that.

'Then help cure me of my ignorance, Kath. Explain things to me. When did you first notice things were going wrong with Greg?'

'Greg, Greg. There's been a bloody nuclear war and all you want to talk about is Greg.'

'Yes, the war, of course. But I thought we'd better take one thing at a time.'

'And Greg is more important than the war? You certainly have an odd system of priorities. Perhaps Greg caused the war. You know he's got a baseball cap that says MAKE WAR NOT LOVE on it? Perhaps he sat there drinking beer and pressed the button just for something to do.'

'That's an interesting approach. I think we could get somewhere with that.' I didn't respond. He went on, 'Would we be right in thinking that with Greg you sort of were putting all your eggs in one basket? You thought he was your last chance? Perhaps you were laying too many expectations on him?'

I'd had enough of this. 'My name is Kathleen Ferris,' I said, as much to myself as to anybody else. 'I'm thirty-eight years old. I left the north and came to the south because I could see what was happening. But the war pursued me. It came anyway. I got in the boat, I let the winds carry me. I took two cats, Paul and Linda. I found this island. I am living here. I don't know what will happen to me, but I know it's the duty of those of us who care about the planet to go on living.' When I stopped I found I'd burst into tears without realizing. The tears ran down the sides of my face and into my ears. I couldn't see, I couldn't hear. I felt I was swimming, drowning.

Eventually, very quietly — or was it just that my ears were full of water? — the man said, 'Yes, we thought you might be seeing things like that.'

'I have been through the bad winds. My skin is falling off. I am thirsty all the time. I don't know how serious it is, but I know I have to go on. If only for the cats. They might need me.'

'Yes.'

'What do you mean, Yes?'

'Well, psychosomatic symptoms can be very convincing.'

'Can't you get it into your head? There's been a bloody nuclear war.'

'Hmmm,' said the man. He was being deliberately provocative.

'All right,' I replied. 'I may as well listen to your version. I can feel you wanting to tell me.'

'Well, we think it goes back to your break-up with Greg. And to your relationship of course. The possessiveness, the violence. But the break-up . . .'

Though I'd been meaning to play along with him, I couldn't help interrupting. 'It wasn't really a break-up. I just took the boat when the war started.'

'Yes, of course. But things between you . . . you wouldn't say they were going well?'

'No worse than with other blokes. He's just a bloke, Greg. He's normal for a bloke.'

'Precisely.'

'What do you mean, *precisely*?'

'Well, we called in your files from the north, you see. There does seem to be a pattern. You like putting all your eggs in one basket. With the same type of man. And that's always a bit dangerous, isn't it?' When I didn't reply, he went on, 'We call it the persistent victim syndrome. PVS.'

I decided to ignore that too. For a start, I didn't know what he was talking about. Spinning some tale or other.

'There's a lot of denial in your life, isn't there? You . . . deny a lot of things.'

'Oh no I don't,' I said. This was ridiculous. I made up my mind to force him out into the open. 'Are you telling me, are you telling me there hasn't been a war?'

'That's right. I mean, it was very worrying. It looked as if there might well be one. But they sorted something out.'

'*They sorted something out!*' I said in a sarcastic shout, because this proved everything. My mind had been remembering that phrase of Greg's which I'd found so complacent. I enjoyed shouting, I wanted to shout something else, so I did. 'Until you've ate at BJ's you ain't shit!' I yelled. I was feeling triumphant, but the man didn't seem to understand, and he laid a hand on my arm as if I needed comforting.

'Yes, they really sorted something out. It never happened.'

'I see,' I replied, still victorious. 'So of course I'm not on the island?'

'Oh no.'

'I imagined it.'

'Yes.'

'And so of course the boat doesn't exist either?'

'Oh yes, you went on the boat.'

'But there weren't any cats on it.'

'Yes, you had two cats with you when they found you. They were terribly thin. They only just survived.'

It was cunning of him not to contradict me entirely. Cunning, but predictable. I decided on a switch of tactics. I'd be puzzled, and a bit pathetic. 'I don't understand,' I said,

reaching out and taking his hand. 'If there wasn't any war, why was I in the boat?'

'Greg,' he said, with a sort of nasty confidence, as if I'd finally admitted something. 'You were running away. We find that those with persistent victim syndrome often experience acute guilt when they finally take flight. Then there was the bad news from the north. That was your excuse. You were exteriorizing things, transferring your confusion and anxiety on to the world. It's normal,' he added patronizingly, though it was obvious he didn't think so. 'Quite normal.'

'I'm not the only persistent victim around here,' I replied. 'The whole bloody world's a persistent victim.'

'Of course.' He agreed without really listening.

'They said there was going to be a war. They said the war had started.'

'They're always saying that. But they sorted something out.'

'So you keep saying. Well. So, in your *version* - I stressed the word - 'where did they find me?'

'About a hundred miles east of Darwin. Going round in circles.'

'Going round in circles,' I repeated. 'That's what the world does.' First he tells me I'm projecting myself on to the world, then he tells me I'm doing what we all know the world does all the time. This really wasn't very impressive.

'And how do you explain my hair falling out?'

'You've been pulling it out, I'm afraid.'

'And my skin falling off?'

'It's been a bad time for you. You've been under severe stress. It's not unusual. But it'll get better.'

'And how do you explain that I remember very clearly everything that's happened from the news of the war breaking out in the north to my time here on the island?'

'Well, the technical term is *fabulation*. You make up a story to cover the facts you don't know or can't accept. You keep a few true facts and spin a new story round them. Particularly in cases of double stress.'

'Meaning?'

'Severe stress in the private life coupled with a political crisis in the world outside. We always get an increase in admissions when things are going badly in the north.'

'You'll be telling me next there were dozens of crazy people going round in circles in the sea.'

'A few. Four or five maybe. Most of the admissions didn't make it as far as a boat, though.' He sounded as if he was impressed by my tenacity.

'And how many . . . admissions have you had this time?'

'A couple of dozen.'

'Well, I admire your fabrication,' I said, using the technical term back to him. That put him in his place. 'I really think it's quite clever.' He'd given himself away, of course. *You keep a few true facts and spin a new story round them* - exactly what he'd done.

'I'm glad we're making some progress, Kath.'

'Go away and sort something out,' I said. 'By the way, is there any news of the reindeer?'

'What sort of news did you want?'

'Good news!' I shouted. 'Good news!'

'I'll see what I can do.'

* * *

She felt tired when the nightmare left; tired but victorious. She had drawn out the worst the tempter had to offer. She would be safe now. Of course, he'd made a whole series of blunders. *I'm glad we're making some progress*: he should never have said that. Nobody likes to be patronized by their own mind. The one that really gave him away was about the cats getting thin. That had been the most noticeable thing about the whole voyage, the way the cats got fatter, the way they loved the fish she caught.

She made a decision not to speak to the men again. She couldn't stop them coming - and she was sure they would visit her for many more nights - but she wouldn't speak to them. She had learnt how to shut her eyes in her nightmares; now she would learn to stop her ears and her mouth. She wouldn't be tempted. She wouldn't.

If she had to die then she would. They must have come

through some very bad winds; how bad she would only find out when she either recovered or died. She worried about the cats, but believed they'd be able to fend for themselves. They would return to nature. They already had. When the food from the boat ran out they took to hunting. Or rather Paul did: Linda was too fat to hunt. Paul brought back small creatures for her, things like voles and mice. Tears bubbled into Kath's eyes when he did so.

It was all about her mind being afraid of its own death, that's what she finally decided. When her skin got bad and her hair started falling out, her mind tried to think up an alternative explanation. She even knew the technical term for it now: fabrication. Where had she picked that up from? She must have read it in a magazine somewhere. Fabrication. You keep a few true facts and spin a new story round them.

She remembered an exchange she'd had the previous night. The man in the dream said you deny a lot of things in your life don't you, and she'd answered oh no I don't. That was funny, looking back; but it was also serious. You mustn't fool yourself. That's what Greg did, that's what most people did. We've got to look at things how they are; we can't rely on fabrication any more. It's the only way we'll survive.

* * *

The next day, on a small, scrubby island in the Torres Strait, Kath Ferris woke up to find that Linda had given birth. Five tortoiseshell kittens, all huddling together, helpless and blind, yet quite without defect. She felt such love. The cat wouldn't let her touch the kittens, of course, but that was all right, that was normal. She felt such happiness! Such hope!