OUR TRAGIC UNIVERSE

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I WAS READING about how to survive the end of the universe when I got a text message from my friend Libby. Her text said, *Can you be at the Embankment in fifteen minutes? Big disaster.* It was a cold Sunday in early February, and I'd spent most of it curled up in bed in the damp and disintegrating terraced cottage in Dartmouth. Oscar, the literary editor of the newspaper I wrote for, had sent me *The Science of Living Forever* by Kelsey Newman to review, along with a compliments slip with a deadline on it. In those days I'd review anything, because I needed the money. It wasn't so bad: I'd built up some kind of reputation reviewing science books and so Oscar gave me all the best ones. My boyfriend Christopher did unpaid volunteer work on heritage sites, so it was down to me to pay the rent. I never turned down a commission, although I wasn't at all sure what I'd say about Kelsey Newman's book and this idea of surviving beyond the end of time.

In some ways I was already surviving beyond the end of time: beyond deadlines, overdraft limits and ultimatums from my bank manager. I hit deadlines to get money, but not always to give it away. That winter I'd been reduced to cashing all my cheques in a high-commission, no-questions-asked place in Paignton and paying utility bills at the Post Office with cash. Although what did anyone expect? I was hardly a big-time writer, although I was still planning to be. Every time a white envelope came from the bank Christopher added it to the pile of mail on my desk upstairs. I never opened any of these envelopes. I didn't have much credit on my phone, so I didn't

text Libby back; but I put the book down and got off the bed and put on some trainers. I'd vowed never to go out in Dartmouth on a Sunday evening, for complicated reasons. But I couldn't say no to Libby.

The grey afternoon was curling into evening like a frightened woodlouse. I still had fifty pages of *The Science of Living Forever* to read and the deadline for my review was the next day. I'd have to finish the book later and make sure I filed the review on time if I wanted any chance of it being in the paper on Sunday. If it didn't go in until the next week I would miss being paid for a month. Downstairs, Christopher was on the sofa cutting pieces of reclaimed wood to make a toolbox. We didn't have a garden he could work in, just a tiny, completely enclosed and very high-walled concrete yard in which frogs and other small animals sometimes appeared miraculously, as if they had dropped from the sky. As I walked into the sitting room I could see sawdust getting in everything, but I didn't point this out. My guitar was propped up by the fireplace. Every time Christopher moved the saw back or forth the vibration travelled across the room and made the thick E string tremble. The sound was so low and sad and haunting that you could barely hear it. Christopher was sawing hard: his brother Josh had been for lunch yesterday and he still wasn't over it. Josh found it therapeutic talking about their mother's death; Christopher didn't. Josh was happy that their father was dating a 25-year-old waitress; Christopher thought it was disgusting. It had probably been up to me to stop the conversation, but at the time I was worrying that I hadn't even looked to see what book I was supposed to be reviewing, and that the bread was running out and we didn't have any more. Also, I didn't really know how to stop the conversation.

Sometimes when I went downstairs I'd think about saying something, and then I'd imagine how Christopher would be likely to reply and end up saying nothing at all. This time I said, 'Guess what?' and Christopher, still sawing madly, as if into the back of his brother's head, or perhaps Milly's head, said, 'You know I hate it when you start conversations like that, babe.' I apologised, but when he asked me to hold a piece of wood for him I said I had to take the dog out.

'She hasn't been out for ages,' I said. 'And it's getting dark.'

Bess was in the hallway, rolling on a piece of rawhide.

'I thought you walked her this afternoon,' Christopher said.

I put on my anorak and my red wool scarf and left without saying anything else; I didn't even turn back when I heard Christopher's box of nails fall on the floor, although I knew I should have done.

How do you survive the end of time? It's quite simple. By the time the universe is old enough and frail enough to collapse, humans will be able to do whatever they like with it. They'll have had billions of years to learn, and there'll be no matron to stop them, and no liberal broadsheets and no doomy hymns. By then it'll just be a case of wheeling one decrepit planet to one side of the universe while another one pisses itself sadly in another galaxy. And all this while waiting for the final crunch, as everything becomes everything else as the universe begins its beautiful collapse, panting and sweating until all life arcs out of it and all matter in existence is crushed into a single point and then disappears. In the barely audible last gasp of the collapsing

universe, its last orgasmic sigh, all its mucus and pus and rancid *jus* will become pure energy, capable of everything imaginable, just for a moment. I didn't know why I'd contemplated trying to explain this to Christopher. He'd once made me cry because he refused to accept spatial dimensions, and we'd had a massive row because he wouldn't look at my diagram that proved Pythagoras's theorem. According to Christopher the books I reviewed were 'too cerebral, babe'. I didn't know what he'd make of this one, which was a complete head-fuck.

According to Kelsey Newman, the universe, which always was a computer, will, for one moment – not even that – be so dense and have so much energy that it will be able to compute anything at all. So why not simply program it to simulate another universe, a new one that will never end, and in which everyone can live happily ever after? This moment will be called the Omega Point, and, because it has the power to contain everything, will be indistinguishable from God. It will be different from God, though, because it will run on a processing power called *Energia*. As the universe gets ready to collapse, no one will be writing poetry about it or making love for the last time or just bobbing around, stoned and listless, waiting for annihilation, imagining something beautiful and unfathomable on the other side. All hands will be on deck for the ultimate goal: survival. Using only physics and their bare hands, humans will construct the Omega Point, which, with its infinite power, can and for various reasons definitely will, bring everyone back to life – yes, even you – billions of years after you have died, and it will love everyone and create a perfect heaven. At the end of the universe anything could happen, except for one thing.

You can't die, ever again.

It wasn't the kind of book Oscar usually sent me. We reviewed popular science, however wacky, but we drew the line at anything New Age. Was this a New Age book? It was hard to tell. According to the blurb, Newman was a well-respected psychoanalyst from New York who had once advised a president, although it didn't say which one. He had been inspired to write his book by reading the work of the equally well-respected physicist Frank Tipler, who had come up with the idea of the Omega Point and done all the necessary equations to prove that you and I – and everyone who ever lived, and every possible human who never lived – will be resurrected at the end of time, as soon as the power becomes available to do it. Your death will therefore be just a little sleep, and you won't notice any time passing between it and waking up in eternity.

Why bother with anything, in that case? Why bother trying to become a famous novelist? Why bother paying bills, shaving your legs, trying to eat enough vegetables? The sensible thing, if this theory were true, would be to shoot yourself now. But then what? I loved the universe, particularly the juicy bits like relativity, gravity, up and down quarks, evolution, and the wave function, which I almost understood; but I didn't love it so much that I wanted to stay beyond its natural end, stuck with everyone else in some sort of coma, wired up to a cosmic life-support machine. I had been told once – and reminded of it again recently – that I would come to nothing. What on earth would I do with all that heaven? Living for ever would be like marrying yourself, with no possibility of a divorce.

There were thirty-one stone steps down to the street. I walked with B past Reg's place on the corner and across the market square, which was completely deserted except for one seagull pecking at a flapping chip wrapper and making the sound they all make: *ack*, *ack*, *ack*, like a lonely machine gun. B hugged the wall under the Butterwalk by Miller's Deli, and stopped to pee as soon as we were in the Royal Avenue Gardens. Everything seemed to be closed, broken, dead or in hibernation. The bandstand was empty and the fountain was dry. The palm trees shivered. There was a smell of salt in the wind, and something seaweedy, which became stronger as we approached the river. No one was around. It was getting darker, and the sky above Kingswear was bruising into a mushy green, brown and purple, like the skin of an apple. The wind was coming in from the sea, and all the little boats danced on their moorings as if they were enchanted, making ghostly sounds.

I put up the hood on my jacket, while B sniffed things. She liked to visit all the benches on the North Embankment, one by one, then go around the Boat Float and home via Coronation Park. She was always slower and sleepier in winter, and at home I kept finding her balled up in the bedclothes as if she was trying to hibernate. But she still followed her routine when we came out. Every day we stopped to look at the mysterious building site in Coronation Park. The previous autumn Libby had heard from Old Mary at her knitting group that it was going to be a small, stone Labyrinth set on a piece of raised and landscaped lawn with a view of the river. But it was still just a hole. The council was funding the project because a study had said it would help calm everybody down. Dartmouth was a sleepy harbour where people came to retire, die, write novels

or quietly open a shop. The only people who needed calming down were the cadets at the Royal Naval College, and they would never come to the Labyrinth. My main worry was that the builders might cut down my favourite tree, and almost every day I went and checked it was still there. The wind tore across the park and I hurried B past the building site with its flapping plastic and temporary fencing, looked at my tree and then went back to the Embankment. This February was cold, cruel and spiteful, and I wanted to be at home in bed, even though it wasn't much warmer than outside and the damp in the house made me wheeze. B obviously wanted to go home too, and I imagined her curled under the covers with me, both of us in hibernation.

There was still no one around. Perhaps I'd been worrying over nothing all these months. Perhaps he didn't come any more. Perhaps he'd never come.

Upriver, the Higher Ferry was chugging across the water towards Dartmouth. It had only one car on it, probably Libby's, and its lights danced in the gloom. Things on the river tinkled. I stood there waiting for Libby, looking at all the boats, not looking for *him*. I listened to the *ding-ding-ding* sounds and wondered why they seemed ghostly. I reached into the inside pocket of my anorak. I already knew what was there: a scrap of paper with an email address on it that I knew by heart, and a brown medicine bottle with a pipette. The bottle contained the last dregs of the flower remedy my friend Vi had made me several weeks before. I'd been up to Scotland for Christmas to stay with Vi and her partner Frank in their holiday cottage while Christopher went to Brighton, but it had all gone wrong and now Vi wasn't speaking to me. Because of this, I was

objectively lonelier than I had ever been, but it was OK because I had a house and a boyfriend and B, which was more than enough. I also had this remedy, which helped. Her handwriting was still just legible on the label. *Gentian, holly, hornbeam, sweet chestnut, wild oat and wild rose.* I put a few drops of the mixture on my tongue and felt warm, just for a second.

After a couple more minutes the ferry arrived. There was a thump as the flap came down; then the gate opened and the single car drove off and headed down the Embankment. It was Libby's, so I waved. Libby and her husband Bob had closed down their failing comic shop two years before and now ran Miller's Deli, where they sold all sorts of things, including unpasteurised cheeses, goose fat, lemon tart, home-made salads, driftwood sculptures and knitted shawls and blankets made by them or their friends. I made jam and marmalade for Miller's Deli to supplement the income I got from my writing projects. My favourite lunch was a tub of pickled garlic, some home-made fish pâté and a half-baguette, which I often picked up from the shop on winter mornings. Libby was driving slowly, with the window down, her hair going crazy in the wind. When she saw me she stopped the car. She was wearing jeans and a tight T-shirt with a hand-knitted, red shawl tied over the top, as if February was never cruel to her at all, and as if she'd never worn thick glasses, or baggy tops screen-printed with characters from horror films.

'Meg, fuck. Thank God. Christopher isn't here, is he?'

'Of course not,' I said. I looked around. 'No one's here. Why? Are you OK? Aren't you cold?'

'No. Too much adrenaline. I'm in deep shit. Can I say I was at yours?'

'When?'

'Today. All day. Last night as well. Bob came back early. Can you believe they diverted his flight to Exeter because of a slippery runway at Gatwick?'

'Have you spoken to him yet?'

'No, but he's sent messages. He was supposed to text me when his plane landed at Gatwick, which I thought would give me loads of time to get home and change and make the place look lived-in and stuff. When I heard a text come I just thought it was Bob at Gatwick – it was the right sort of time – and I was in bed with Mark, so I didn't look at it immediately. I mean, it's half an hour to get off the plane and out of the airport, and then another half an hour into Victoria, then twenty minutes across to Paddington, and then three hours to Totnes to pick up his car and then another twenty-five minutes to drive back here. So I wasn't exactly panicking. But by the time I looked there was another text saying *See you in half an hour*. Then another one came asking where I was and if I was all right. I almost had a heart attack.'

Libby was having an affair with Mark, a bedraggled guy who had washed up in Churston, a village over the river in Torbay, when he'd inherited a beach hut from his grandfather. He lived in the beach hut, ate fish and picked up any casual work he could get in the boatyards and harbours. He was saving to start his own boat-design company, but Libby said he was about a million miles away from that. Libby worked in the deli with Bob most weekdays, and spent the rest of her time knitting increasingly complicated things and writing Mark love letters in dark red ink, while Bob played his electric guitars and did the shop accounts. She had invented a book group at Churston

library and told Bob that's where she went on a Friday night. She also saw Mark at her knitting group on a Wednesday, although that was more problematic, because there was always the chance that Bob might drop in with leftover cake from the shop, or that one of the old ladies might see Mark touching Libby's knee. This weekend had been different, though, because Bob had gone to see his great-aunt and -uncle in Germany. She'd been with Mark since Friday.

'So you came to mine last night? And . . . ?'

I frowned. We both knew there was no way Libby would ever spend a whole evening at my house. Sometimes, but not so often recently, she'd drop by with a bottle of wine from the shop. Then we'd sit at the kitchen table, while Christopher simmered on the sofa a few feet away, watching American news or documentaries about dictators on our pirated Sky system and mumbling about the corruption of the world, and the rich, and greed. He did this on purpose because Libby had money and he didn't like it. Mostly when I saw Libby it was at the pub, although Christopher often complained about me going out and leaving him on his own. B had been sniffing the ground, but now put her paws up on the side of Libby's car and whimpered through the window. She wanted to get in. She loved going in cars. Libby patted her head, but didn't look at her.

'No . . . I must have lost my keys.' She started brainstorming. 'We, er, me and you went out last night and I lost my keys and had to stay at yours. I was drunk, and I didn't worry about bothering Bob because he was in Germany and I thought I'd go out and look for my keys today, and in fact that's what I was doing when he sent the messages, but I'd left my phone at yours and . . .'

'But you're driving your car. Do you have separate house keys? I thought they were all on the same keyring.'

Libby looked down. 'Maybe I found the keys . . . Holy shit. Oh, Christ. Oh, Meg, what am I going to do? Why would I have driven the car to your house anyway? It's only a five-minute walk. I'm not sure I can fit this together.' She frowned. 'Come on. You're the writer; you know how to plot things.'

I half-laughed. 'Yeah, right. You read. I'm sure you can plot things too.'

'Yeah, but you do it for a living. And teach it.'

'Yeah, but . . .'

'What's the *formula* here?'

Formula, like the stuff you feed to babies. This was my speciality; she was right. After winning a short story competition in 1997 I'd been offered a contract to write a ground-breaking, literary, serious debut novel: the kind of thing that would win more prizes and be displayed in the windows of bookshops. But I'd actually filled most of the last eleven years writing genre fiction, because it was easy money and I always needed to pay rent and bills and buy food. I'd been given a £1,000 advance for my literary novel, and instead of using it to clear my debts I'd bought a laptop, a nice pen and some notebooks. Just as I'd begun to write the plan for it, Claudia from Orb Books rang and offered me two grand if I could knock out a thriller for teenagers in six weeks. The official author of this book, Zeb Ross, needed to publish four novels a year but didn't in fact exist, and Claudia was recruiting new ghost-writers. It was a no-brainer: double my money and then write the real novel. But I was only a couple of chapters into the real novel when I realised I needed to write another Zeb Ross book,

and then another one. A couple of years later I branched out and wrote four SF books in a series under my own name, all set in a place called Newtopia. I kept meaning to finish my 'proper' novel but it seemed as if this would never happen, even if I stuck around until the end of time. If Kelsey Newman was right and all possible humans were resurrected by the Omega Point at the end of the universe, then Zeb Ross would have to be one of them and then he could write his own books. But I'd probably still have rent to pay.

I sighed. 'The thing is, when you plot a book you can go back and change things that don't work and make everything add up neatly. You can delete paragraphs, pages, whole manuscripts. I can't go back in time and put you on a bus to Mark's, which would probably be the best thing.'

'How would that work?'

I shrugged. 'I don't know. Then you could have walked round to mine and lost your keys and your phone like you said.'

'But why would I have a weekend bag with me?'

'Yeah. I don't know.'

'There must be a way. Let's go back to basics. How do you tell a really good story? I mean, in a nutshell.'

I looked at my watch. Christopher would be wondering where I was.

'Isn't Bob expecting you?' I said.

'I need to get this right, or there'll be no Bob any more.'

'OK. Just keep it simple. Base the story on cause and effect. Have three acts.'

'Three acts?'

'A beginning, a middle and an end. A problem, a climax and a solution. You link them. Put someone on the wrong ship.

Then make it sink. Then rescue them. Not literally, obviously. You have to have a problem and make it get worse and then solve it. Unless it's a tragedy.'

'What if this is a tragedy?'

'Lib . . .'

'All right. So I was out with you and I lost my keys. That's bad. Then to make it worse I got gang-raped while I was looking for them, and now I've lost my memory and the kidnappers took you away because you were a witness, and only Bess knows where you are, and she's trying to tell Christopher, but . . .'

'Too complicated. You need something simpler. You only need to explain the car. The story here is that we went out and you lost your keys, which was a bummer. Then maybe because you lost your keys you lost your car too, which is obviously a bigger bummer. Maybe someone found your keys and stole your car. Who knows? All you know is you lost your keys. The only glitch is you still have your car.'

Yadda, yadda. I seemed to have become a plot-o-matic machine programmed to churn out this kind of thing. But when I was dispensing advice like this to the more junior Orb Books ghostwriters I always said they should believe in their project and not just follow a set of rules. Then again, if they got lost in the wilderness of originality I gently guided them back to the happy path of formula again.

'OK. So how do me and Bob live happily ever after?'

I thought about it for a second.

'Well, obviously you'll have to push your car in the river,' I said, and laughed.

Libby sat there for about ten seconds, her hands becoming paler and paler as she gripped the steering wheel. Then she got

out of the car and looked around. The North Embankment still seemed deserted. There were no kids trying to steal boats, no tourists, no other dog-walkers. No men looking for me. Libby made a noise a little like the one B had made before.

'You're right,' she said. 'It's the only thing to do.'

'Lib,' I said. 'I was joking.'

She got back into her car, did a haphazard three-point turn until it was facing the river and, finally, drove it up on the embankment. For a moment it looked as if she was going to drive her car into the river. I stood there, not knowing if she was messing around, not knowing whether to laugh or try to stop her. Then she got out and walked around to the back of the car. Libby was small but as her biceps tightened I realised how strong her arms were. The car moved; she must have left the handbrake off. She pushed it again, and then the front wheels were over the edge of the embankment.

'Lib,' I said again.

'I must be mad. What am I doing?' she said.

'Nothing,' I said. 'Come on, don't do this. It's going to be very hard to explain.'

Then she pushed her car into the river and threw the keys in after it.

'I'll say kids must have done it,' she said, over the splashing, sucking sound. 'They must have stolen my keys. Even if it does sound crazy, no one will think I was desperate enough to push my own car in the river, will they? Nothing would motivate me to do something as stupid as that. Holy shit. Thank you, Meg. That was a brilliant idea. I'll call you tomorrow if I'm still alive.'

She looked at her watch and then walked away down the Embankment towards Lemon Cottage, her red shawl moving

like a flag in the wind. I remembered a Zen story about a flag in the wind. Does the wind move, or does the flag move? Two monks are arguing about this when a wise man turns up and says, 'The wind is not moving, the flag is not moving. Mind is moving.' I walked on slowly, with B re-sniffing benches as if nothing had happened. Libby didn't look behind her, and I saw her get smaller and smaller until she reached the corner and went off towards Bayard's Cove. Of course, as any scientist would tell you, she didn't really get smaller and smaller; she simply got further away.

The wind breathed heavily down the river, and I half-looked at the little ripples and wakes in the blackish, greenish water as I tried to hurry B home. There was no sign of Libby's car. I was watching the river, not the benches, so when someone said 'Hello,' I jumped. It was a man, half hidden in the gloom. B was already sniffing his ancient walking boots, and he was stroking her between her ears. He was wearing jeans and a duffel coat, and his messy black and grey hair was falling over his face. Had he seen what had happened? He must have done. Did he hear me suggest the whole thing? He looked up. I already knew it was Rowan. So he had come. Had he been coming every Sunday for all this time?

'Hi,' I said. 'You're . . .'

'Hello,' he said. 'Chilly, isn't it?'

'Freezing.'

'You OK?'

'Yeah. I think so. How are you?'

'Cold. Depressed. Needed to get some fresh air. I've been at the Centre all day working on my *Titanic* chapter. Can you believe I'm still at it? I should be grateful I'm still alive, I suppose. Everyone said retiring would kill me.'

Rowan and his partner Lise had relocated to Dartmouth just over a year before to help look after Lise's mother. They lived in a renovated old boathouse near the castle, with spectacular views of the mouth of the harbour. Everything inside it was tasteful and minimal: nothing was old or shabby, although it must have been once. Rowan had not yet retired when I went there for a dinner party. Lise wore too much make-up and spoke to Rowan as if he was a child. She told stories about him getting lost for three hours in a shopping mall, wearing jeans to her company's black-tie Christmas party and breaking the new dishwasher just by touching it. I'd pictured him alone in an airy office at Greenwich University, with an open window and freshly cut grass outside, surrounded by books and drinking a cup of good coffee, secretly dreading these dinner parties. I'd wondered then why he was retiring at all.

'Most people retire and then take up gardening or DIY, don't they?' I said. 'They don't go and get another job as director of a maritime centre. I don't think you really are retired, by most normal definitions of the word.'

He sighed. 'Pottering about with model ships all day. Wind machines. Collections of rocks and barnacles. Interactive tide tables. It's not rocket science. Still, I've had time to take up yoga.'

So he wasn't going to mention Libby and her car. We were going to have a 'normal' conversation, slightly gloomy, slightly flirty, like the ones we used to have when he came to Torquay

library every day before the Maritime Centre opened – to do paperwork – and we ended up going for lunch and coffee all the time. Would we kiss at the end of this conversation, as we had done at the end of the last one?

'How's your writing going?' he asked me.

'OK,' I said. 'Well, sort of. I'm back on chapter one of my "proper" novel yet again, re-writing. The other day I worked out that I've deleted something like a million words of this novel in the last ten years. You'd think that would make it really good, but it hasn't. It's a bit of a mess now, but never mind.'

'Are you still using the ghost ships?'

'No. Well, sort of. They might come back.'

'And how was Greece?'

I frowned. 'I didn't go in the end. Had too much other work on here.'

'Oh. That's a shame.'

'Anyway, how about you? How's the chapter?'

'Oh, I keep having to read new things. I just read a hundred-page poem by Hans Magnus Enzensberger about the sinking of the *Titanic*.'

'Was it good?'

'I'll lend it to you. It's about some other stuff as well as the sinking of the *Titanic*. There's a bit where members of a religious cult are waiting on a hill for the end of the world, which is supposed to take place that afternoon. When the world doesn't end, they all have to go out and buy new toothbrushes.'

I laughed, although I was remembering that Rowan had already lent me a book that I hadn't read, even though I'd meant to. It was an Agatha Christie novel called *The Sittaford Mystery*, and I had no idea why Rowan had given it to me. He'd worked

on a short local project on Agatha Christie's house on the River Dart, which was how he'd come to read the books. But I couldn't imagine he'd found anything that would interest me. I spent enough time messing around with genre fiction anyway.

'Sounds great,' I said. 'Sounds a bit like a book I'm reviewing, except the book I'm reviewing isn't great.'

'What is it?'

'It's all about how the universe will never end, and how we all get to live for ever. I hate it, and I don't know why.'

'I don't want to live for ever.'

'No. Me neither.'

'What's the point of living for ever? Living now is bad enough.'

'That's what I thought.'

'Are you OK?' he asked me again.

'Yeah. Did you just say you're doing yoga, or did I imagine it?'

'No, you didn't imagine it. I am doing yoga.'

'Why?'

He shrugged. 'Bad knees. Getting old. We're not long back from a yoga holiday in India, actually. Missed Christmas, which was good. Saw some kingfishers too.' Rowan stroked B's head again while I looked away. I knew that his casual 'we' meant he and Lise. Long-term couples often did that, I'd noticed: referred to themselves as 'we' all the time. Whenever I phoned my mother and asked, 'How are you?' she replied, 'We're fine.' I never talked about Christopher and me in that way. Maybe it would come in time. Not that I'd know how to use it, since we hardly ever did anything together. And we were never fine. We were even less fine since I'd kissed Rowan, because I knew that if I could kiss someone

else, then I could never kiss Christopher again. In the last five months he hadn't really noticed this.

'How's Lise?' I asked. 'Is she still working on her book?'

I ran retreats twice a year for Orb Books ghostwriters in a clapped-out hotel in Torquay. These were supposed to teach already talented writers the finer points of plotting and structure and the Orb Books 'method'. Orb Books didn't mind if I charged a few local people to come too, so whenever a retreat was scheduled I put up posters in the Harbour Bookshop and usually got three or four takers. Lise had come to one the previous year. She had been planning to use some of her retirement to write a fictionalised account of her parents' experiences in the war, but as far as I knew she hadn't retired yet. She still took the train to London twice a week and worked at home the rest of the time.

Rowan shrugged. 'I don't think so.'

'Oh.'

He reached down and played with one of B's ears, making it stand up and then flop down again.

'Your dog's quite lovely,' he said.

'I know. Thanks. She's being quite patient while you abuse her ears.'

'I think she likes it.'

'Yeah, she probably does.'

'I meant to say . . . I've been looking at some of the cultural premonitions connected with the *Titanic* recently,' Rowan said. 'And I thought of you.' He looked down at the ground, then at one of B's ears and then up at me. 'I mean, I thought you'd be interested. I wondered if I should get in touch with you.'

'Get in touch with me any time.' I blushed. 'Just email me. What's a cultural premonition?'

'Writing about the disaster before it happened, or painting pictures of it. Lots of people did.'

'Seriously?'

'Yeah.'

'So it's paranormal in some way?' I could feel myself wrinkling my nose.

'No. Cultural. The premonitions are cultural rather than supernatural.'

'How?'

'It's like . . . Have you heard of the Cottingley Fairies?'

I shook my head. 'No.'

'Remind me to tell you about them sometime. It's quite an interesting case-study in how people decide to believe in things, and what people want to believe. I'd guess that there are usually cultural explanations for supernatural things if you look hard enough.'

'They weren't on the *Titanic* as well?'

'Huh?'

'These fairies.'

'No. They were in my old home town.'

'I thought your old home town was in the Pacific.'

'After I left San Cristobal I was in Cottingley before I went to Cambridge. My mother came from Cottingley, although she was dead by the time I left San Cristobal. Mind you, the fairies were long before that.' He frowned. 'I'll tell you the whole story sometime, but it's too complicated now. I thought you might have heard of them. Silly, really, bringing them up.'

'Oh. Well, I know a good joke about sheep that's all about how people decide to believe things, if that's of any interest.'

He smiled in the gloom. 'What is it?'

'OK. A biologist, a mathematician, a physicist and a philosopher are on a train in Scotland. They see a black sheep from a train window. The biologist says, "All sheep in Scotland are black!" The physicist says, "You can't generalise like that. But we know at least one sheep in Scotland is black." The mathematician strokes his beard and says, "All we can really say for sure is that one side of one sheep in Scotland is black." The philosopher looks out of the window, thinks about it all for a while and says, "I don't believe in sheep." My father used to tell it as if it said something about the perils of philosophy, although I wondered whether it said something else about the perils of science. My father is a physicist.'

Rowan laughed. 'I like that. I like sheep. I believe in them.'

'Did you know they can remember human faces for ten years, and recognise photographs of individual people?'

'So when they fix you with that stupid look they're actually memorising you?'

'I guess so.'

'Like those machines at Heathrow. But why?'

'Who knows? Maybe sheep will take over the world. Maybe that's their plan. Another plot for Zeb Ross, perhaps. I'll have to tell Orb Books.'

I wasn't really supposed to talk to anyone about Zeb Ross, and everyone who worked on the series signed NDAs. But in reality you can't pretend not to be writing a novel when you are, and pretty much everyone knew that those kinds of books were ghosted – except, perhaps, for their readers, particularly the ones who sent Zeb fan mail asking what colour his eyes were, and whether he was married.

B was now trying to get on Rowan's lap. I pulled her off,

wondering what I smelled of as I leaned over him. And I didn't mean to look into his eyes, but when I did I saw that they were shining with tears. 'Hay fever' is what people usually say when they are crying; it's what I say, but not in February. I imagined Christopher walking along the river and finding me looking into Rowan's eyes, and then seeing my eyes suddenly full of tears, because when someone I care about cries I always want to cry too. He never knew about the lunches, or the kiss. Suddenly, joking about sheep didn't seem quite right, even though Rowan was still smiling. I didn't say anything for a moment.

'Why did she do it?' he asked.

'Who?'

'Libby Miller. Why did she push her car in the river?'

'She's the one I told you about ages ago. She's having a tragic love affair. Didn't you hear what we were saying?'

'No. I only got here just as she pushed it in.'

'Oh. Well.'

'I won't say anything.'

'Thanks.'

'Funny how things just go, isn't it?' he said.

'Sorry?'

'The car in the river. It's just *gone*.'

'It's for the best, I'm sure,' I said.

Rowan got up to leave, and I felt like a melting iceberg as I said goodbye and walked away from him. I didn't know what was wrong with me. I could have emailed him any time I'd wanted to. I could have got in touch to tell him I'd read the book he'd lent me, but I hadn't. I could have emailed him to write off the kiss as a mistake and tell him how much I missed our friendship. As I walked away, I imagined going back and

asking him if he had come out tonight because of me, and then him looking puzzled and saying it was all just a coincidence.

Was it a coincidence that we'd ended up at the library together? It must have been. I didn't usually tell people that I worked in the library every weekday. It was such a weird thing to do when I had a perfectly good house to work in, and if I ever mentioned my asthma and the damp people didn't understand why I just didn't simply move. I recognised Rowan the first day he came to work at the library. He seemed to recognise me, too. After we'd spent a day or so just nodding and smiling at one another I showed him how to get his emails on his laptop rather than the library computers and then he took me to Lucky's for lunch to say thanks. Over lunch we realised we had friends – Frank and Vi – in common. Frank had been my lecturer almost twenty years before, and he and Vi had been something like a second set of parents for me since then. Rowan had been at Goldsmiths before he got his chair in history at Greenwich, and had met Frank there. Vi was an anthropologist, and she and Rowan had really hit it off and ended up working together on re-enactment projects. They'd wanted to reconstruct the voyage of the *Beagle*, but could never secure any funding. But they did once spend a successful couple of weeks in Norfolk re-enacting Captain Cook's death on Hawai'i with their post-graduate students.

Cook had been killed by his previously generous hosts when he came back to the island to fix his broken boat. ('It would be like having your parents come to stay,' Vi explained to me once,

'and just after you've settled down to eat with your put-upon partner and vowed never to have them back again, their car breaks down and they return to stay for another week while your local garage sources the part to mend their car.') Was he killed because he demanded too much generosity? Or was it because he'd inadvertently become a character in a ritual, and this character wasn't supposed to return? Vi, Rowan and the students decided to act out a situation as close as possible to the one in which Cook and the islanders had found themselves. They'd hired an old beachfront hotel to function as 'Hawai'i' – a closed community into which Cook came, went and came again. Rowan played Cook, and Vi played the Hawai'ian King and chiefs. The students played islanders, and after the project had to write up how they'd felt about having to bow and scrape to Cook, and wait on him hand and foot. Could this have led one of them to want to kill him, or was there more to it? How much did they believe in the ritual? Rowan wrote about how interesting it was to find yourself allowing and accepting huge amounts of deference and generosity, and, after a while, becoming upset if people don't give you everything you want. An edited version of the experiment was published in *Granta* magazine.

When I'd asked Vi about Rowan, not long after I'd met him, she had told me how fastidious he was about always taking a good map and a pair of walking boots anywhere he went. I couldn't bear to admit to myself that I was interested in him, but I lapped up everything Vi said. I would have found out his shoe size if I could have done. When I discovered that he and Vi shared a birthday I even looked up his astrological chart, despite not believing in astrological charts. From Rowan I heard

things about Vi that I mostly knew already. Vi's projects always involved what she provocatively called 'going native'. Over the years she had picked up several colloquial languages, five complicated tattoos, three 'lost' herbarium specimen collections, a drum kit, a dress made from leaves, and malaria. After her long period of Pacific studies, she took more study leave from the university, got a job as a care assistant and embarked on an ethnography of a nursing home in Brighton, which became her bestselling book *I Want to Die, Please*. Now she was working on a project about subculture and style in late-middle-aged people in the UK. Rowan made lots of jokes about that, mainly at his own expense.

Vi never used maps, but relied on a strange kind of 'luck' to find her way around. If she found a tree that had been cut down she apologised to it on behalf of humans. She talked to inanimate objects as if they too were alive, although since working at the nursing home her conversations with these objects often began with 'How the fuck are you, then?' She used tea tree oil as an antiseptic, and ginger to settle a bad stomach. For everything else she used 25+ manuka honey. One time in Scotland I'd gone on a hike with Frank and Vi and she had fixed his sprained ankle with a bottle of vinegar and some daisies. I told Rowan about this in some detail and then felt I'd betrayed Vi by laughing at her. Then again, we laughed at a lot of things.

We found all sorts of excuses to have coffee or lunch at Lucky's and continue the long, rambling conversations we'd started. These included our thoughts on playing guitar, whether it was immoral to use a dictionary when doing cryptic crosswords, why neither of us could sit at a messy table, why we

hated shopping and how many ferry disasters there'd ever been on the River Dart. We discovered that we both disliked email: me because I had a psychological problem with replying to them, and Rowan because he got too many of them and preferred pen and paper. We joked about reading each other's minds, and tried to guess each other's lunch order every day. Bizarrely, we'd bumped into each other in a one-off flea market in the hall next to the library, both looking for an antique fountain pen to give to the other as a thank-you present. He was – still – thanking me for helping with his email. I can't remember what I was thanking him for. And we kept parking our cars next to each other in the library car park. Once when there wasn't a space free next to his car I drove round the car park until one did become free, because I didn't want to break the symmetry. A few days later I arrived first, and when I left the library that afternoon and saw his car several rows away from mine I felt like crying.

When Rowan's office in the Maritime Centre was completed we went for our last lunch. On the way there we'd been talking about the *Titanic*, and I'd recited Thomas Hardy's 'The Convergence of the Twain' and told Rowan my theory that it is a tragic love story as well as a disaster poem. After that he looked at me, and his eyes held mine for a second longer than they should have. Over lunch he told me that he was planning to write a completely different book after the one on shipwrecks, something that would involve going back to the Galápagos Islands for at least a year, but not as Darwin or anyone else: just as himself. I could tell he wouldn't hang around in Devon for long. Once Lise's mother was dead and Rowan's book was finished they were bound to sell the converted boathouse and

move on. If I was the iceberg and he was the ship, we'd never converge, because he would change course before it was too late. I wouldn't sink him, and he wouldn't destroy me either. There would be no jarring of 'two hemispheres'.

We stayed in Lucky's until gone four, talking about Rowan's plans for exhibitions and conferences, and ways in which I could get involved. We laughed a lot as these collaborations became more and more absurd. We never explicitly said we wanted to see one another again, but we planned thousands of ways it could happen. Our eyes touched again, for longer. I breathed out as he breathed in and the molecules of air between us danced back and forth in a frenzied tango that no one else could see or feel. But we didn't physically touch: we never had. We walked back to our cars together as if we were walking through a force-field. Rowan said quietly, 'I often go for a walk in Dartmouth on a Sunday evening. Maybe we'll bump into one another sometime.' Then, even though I'm sure we meant to just say goodbye by shaking hands or kissing on the cheek, we ended up taking each other's hands and then kissing properly, deeply, gently stroking each other's hair. Afterwards, as I drove home panicking and sweating and moaning his name, I realised that I hadn't kissed anyone like that for almost seven years. We didn't have each other's phone numbers, but we had exchanged email addresses. I felt that an affair was inevitable, even though I didn't want to have one. I'd had plenty of complicated break-ups but never an affair. Who would email the other first, I'd wondered? Who would fashion the iceberg?

Neither of us did.