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Mumma,
Yes love?
Did you know?
What's that?
A billion is a lot more than tons.
It is. You're right.
Mumma?
Yes love?
Can I watch another cartoon?

*

It is very hot in the back of the van.

The writer's small daughter is sprawled uncomfortably in the seat beside her, headphones on, staring at the grubby screen of the laptop, watching a cartoon in which three children are dressed as superheroes. They have a totem pole with wings and a vehicle that flies. Their enemies are a young man with a grey streak in his hair and a girl on a hoverboard. They dress as a gecko, an owl and a cat. In this episode, the boy dressed as a gecko loses his voice, or finds it – the woman does not know which, despite the fact that she has half watched it many times. Five episodes of this cartoon downloaded hastily in an airless Mexico City hotel room ten days ago are all she has had – all her daughter has had, once the colouring books and food and juice and stories have lost their appeal – for distraction from the endless road.

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The woman shifts in her seat and crumbs from saltine crackers fall from her lap onto the floor. Her back is stiff. Everything is stiff. Her skin is desert-weathered, her lips chapped. She spent the entirety of last night sitting, awake, alongside the other eleven occupants of this van, around a fire, several thousand feet up in the mountains of the Sierra Madre Occidental. Before it was dawn, they kicked earth over the embers, packed up their belongings, their sleeping bags and dusty blankets and coats and hats and bags, and carried them and their children down the side of the mountain. Now, after close to seven hours' driving, hugging the pines and the heights, the vegetation is changing, there are palm trees, there is bougainvillea, there are signs for Pacífico, the beer of the coast – jaunty, nautical; an anchor and the sea framed within a lifebelt – painted onto the sides of the little roadside tiendas.

She should really try to nap, but the episodes of the cartoon need changing manually, so if she were to sleep, she would need to wake again after eleven minutes. Which would likely be worse than not sleeping at all. Besides, soon, in a couple of hours, perhaps less, they will no longer be in this van, they will be in the town of their destination, a sleepy old colonial remnant, and when they have completed this last leg of the journey there will be a hotel room and a bed and air conditioning, a cold Pacífico, some food. And then, perhaps, sleep.

On the screen of the laptop, the credits roll. The woman presses pause and pulls her daughter over towards her. Her little girl wriggles. She feels hot to the touch. Her cheeks are red. There is the warm yeasty unbrushed-teeth smell of her breath.

Do you want something to eat?

The woman leans forward, rattles the seat pocket. Slim pickings: day-old crackers. An apple. Spicy crisps.

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Her daughter shakes her head. Her glassy eyes slide back to the screen. Milk, says the little girl. Mi-ilk.

She seems only to want to drink milk. Not water. Oat milk if possible, almond milk if not. Three, four, five times a day, from a bottle. Which has necessitated frequent stops at roadside shops.

We don't have milk, poppet. We'll stop soon and I'll get some more. Promise.

Her daughter's face twists. She looks like she might be about to cry. Or hit something. I. Want. Mi-ilk, she says.

Most of the time, on this journey, here in this double seat they have shared across the miles and hours of Mexican highway, this is how her little daughter has looked. The writer doesn't blame her. Most of the time, on this journey, this is how she herself has felt.

I. Want. Mi-ilk. I.WANT. MY. MI-ILK.

Sweetheart. We don't have any milk. I just said. Story? the writer tries, reaching for her Kindle.

The writer went along to a parenting group once when her daughter was tiny, at which a need for statements was impressed upon the mothers who were gathered there.

Children, said the woman who was leading the group, *are presented with too much choice. Bamboozled with it. How are they supposed to know what they want for dinner? We think we are being good parents by giving them choices, by framing things as questions, but we are being quite the opposite.*

Tell them. Don't ask them. And everyone will be happier.

The writer has never quite got the hang of this.

No! her daughter says now, shaking her head. Not story. Another *car-toon*.

Her daughter, on the other hand, at three years old, has mastered the declarative statement. The woman shrugs. Right

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now, at this stage in the game, she has passed the point of resistance and her daughter knows it.

Okay, she says, toggling at the keypad. Okay.

She finds the next episode and the superhero children are off, released from their digital slumber, streaking across the screen, leaving vapour trails in their wake. They seem to live in a French town, these superhero kids, leaping over higgledy grey houses with mansard roofs by the light of a cold northern moon. Her daughter sings along with the theme tune, drumming with her calves on the edge of the seat.

Inooo-e -night u aaave e day . . . oooaahh eees eroes oo owooo de way pJ masks duduPj MASKSdududu . . .

In the seat in front, the Senegalese woman half turns and smiles at the sound of the tuneless singing. Through the gap in the seats the writer can see the daughter of the Senegalese woman fast asleep and tucked in close to her mother, her face smooth and untroubled. Her lips gently parted.

There are many things the writer would like to learn about being a mother: she would like to learn, for instance, how this elegant Senegalese woman manages to keep her own daughter quiet and placid through all this gruelling journeying without the aid of a screen. How she manages to be strict without being mean. How she never seems to be on the verge of completely losing her shit. The writer would like to learn too how, every time they have arrived somewhere new, even the most improbable of places, the Senegalese woman has immediately managed to undertake the task of locating a pan, boiling water, pouring it into a bowl, and stripping then washing her daughter.

The first time she saw this happen, the writer was struck silent by the sight of the little girl knee-deep in the red plastic bowl in the middle of the desert. There was a leather rope knotted around her belly.

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Is that for protection? the writer asked, shyly.

Yes, said the Senegalese woman, as she washed her daughter with her steady, sure hands, but said no more.

From what? the writer wanted to say but did not.

What she also wanted to say was – *Where might I get one? For my daughter, for myself?*

Instead, she asked to borrow the bowl when the Senegalese woman and her daughter were done.

After their baths, the daughter of the Senegalese woman was dressed in clean clothes, her skin massaged with sweet-smelling oil, while the writer's daughter went straight back out to play in the dirt – the thick desert dirt that wasn't really dirt, more sand and earth, but which coated everything: your hair, your clothes, your lungs. Her daughter loves this dirt – has insisted, when they make their fires at night, that she wishes to sleep on the ground, not tucked up safely in the blankets and sleeping bags of her parents. If she has not been given her way she has protested, has shouted and cried and lamented. And so, a strange little theatre has ensued, watched by all, as the writer and her husband have attempted to cajole their little girl back to the safety of the sleeping bags, away from the flames.

Throughout these scenes, the Senegalese woman and her daughter have invariably been sound asleep, tucked up together on a blanket on the ground, where they have stayed, without moving, throughout the night.

Outside the van, the sun is fierce. The corn crops are throwing shade in the heat-struck fields. The road they are on is a straight one now – for a long time this morning they were following the course of a looping river, the Grande de Santiago – but at the last town they crossed it and now they have left it to its courses further north.

They should, perhaps, have stopped and tried to get milk in

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that last little town, but her daughter was sleeping then; everyone was sleeping then except the writer in the back and her husband and the two men – a Mexican man and a Colombian man – beside him in the front. They were talking, the men, and because there was no music playing, she was able to hear them – speaking about something that happened close to the quiet little town not so very long before, when the members of the Cartel Jalisco Nueva had, apparently, downed a police helicopter with a rocket launcher. The men spoke about this in hushed, sober voices as the van passed slowly through the plaza, past the church, past the small children in uniform hand in hand on their way home from school, their backpacks bumping on their backs.

La violencia, the Mexican man in the front said, shaking his head, as they passed out onto the road. It was too much – too much in the schools, too much in the streets. He was considering leaving Guadalajara, the town of his birth, with his Senegalese wife and child, for Spain.

But that was an hour or so ago. Now they are playing music up there in the front and the mood is different, festive. Her husband is talking, telling a story, gesticulating while he drives the van.

The writer leans forward, calling to him. If you see an OXXO, can you stop? We need milk.

Her husband doesn't hear: they are all laughing at his story. The Mexican man is laughing. Laughing too is the young French woman sitting in the seat behind the writer's husband. She has recently joined them, this young French woman, has only had a place in the van for twenty-four hours or so. She met them all up in the mountains, where she was travelling alone, researching traditional medicine for a book to be published in France. They invited her to travel with them. It might have been her, actually – the writer – that extended the

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invitation, she can't quite remember how it happened, but the young French woman accepted easily, throwing her enviably light backpack into the back of the van, taking her place in the front where the breezes are cool.

The writer studies her husband's back: the set of his shoulders, the hook of his arm over the edge of the van window. He has taken up smoking again on this trip, a cigarette dangling constantly from his fingers. She knows this version of him well. This was the one she first met, twenty years ago, half-crazed and un-slept, right at the edge of everything, smoking as if his life depended on it.

They are separating, she and her husband, after two decades together.

This fact is new.

Only really a fact for a few weeks or so. Before that it was a possibility – one potential outcome among many. But now it appears to be, unequivocally, the case.

There are many ways of telling the tale.

One might be that they are separating because one day last autumn, back in England, he sent her a text – *we need to talk*. And when she got that text, the woman immediately knew two things – that he was going to tell her something she did not want to hear and that she would already know the thing he had to tell.

And so it had proved.

She remembers the way her body reacted, the breath fast and high, almost panting. *Okay*, she said. *Who?*

When he had finished with his inventory she remembers not moving, just sitting as still as she could, taking stock. Her first thought was *it could be worse*. There were not so many really. He was not in love with any of them. None of them were her close friends. No one was pregnant. She didn't, as she had once thought

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she might, ask him for details. That could come later. She believed, even then, that things were salvageable.

But that, of course, is only one way of telling the tale. There are many more. You could tell the story from the point of view of the young woman who fucked her husband in a small university town in England – her own loves and desires and wants and needs. If you were feeling daring, you could try to tell it from the point of view of their bed – a bed made for them by a furniture-maker friend when he knew they were trying to conceive a child. You could have the bed speak – talk about all the different nights, all the different forms of love and sadness or anger or grief and absence that it had seen.

Or you could simply admit that it is complicated. That there are many different sides to every story, and leave it at that.

The writer leans forward and taps the Senegalese woman on the shoulder. Can you pass the message to my husband please? We need milk.

The Senegalese woman nods, leans forward, taps the shoulder of the French woman in front of her, gesturing towards the husband, and the French woman in turn leans forward and touches the husband on the back. He half turns, grinning at the French woman, happy to be touched. The French woman gestures to the back of the van and the husband's face changes, clouding as it assumes the mask of parental responsibility.

You okay back there?

Milk, the writer calls. If you see an OXXO store, please can you stop? We need milk.

Sure.

And can we try the air con? It's hot back here.

Her husband fiddles with the air conditioning. A cool trickle of air just about reaches the back.

Thanks.

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Her husband starts talking again, picking up where he left off, gathering the threads of whatever story he is telling together, jabbering away, giving it his best Neal Cassady, holding court while driving the bus.

When they first met, twenty years ago, in a light-strafed jungle in Mexico, they got around to talking about books. He told her he loved Kerouac – *that bit in* On the Road *where they get into Mexico and everything just . . . opens up.*

He had been in Mexico for three months then, a young psychology lecturer studying shamanism, which took the form of steadily making his way through every sort of psychedelic plant he could find. Improbably, perhaps, this youthful pursuit of her husband's, in the years they have been together, has transformed into a career. He holds a conference every other year at his university, at which scientists and academics gather and chatter in earnest groups about the potential of psychedelic plants for western science and medicine.

They are serious people, these scientists and academics, slick young men and women with research chairs at world-leading universities. They walk through the quadrangles and talk about their research into psilocybin and depression. Into ayahuasca and intergenerational trauma. Into MDMA and PTSD for Israeli and US army veterans. These scientists have plenty of data; they have research laboratories and fMRI scanners and acronyms to spare. And they are backed by serious money – by Silicon Valley tech bros and ex-Goldman bankers.

A new renaissance, they say, a*fter the failed experiments of the '60s. A gold rush*, they say. *A new frontier.*

Two years ago, her husband was part of a team that gave scientists LSD in a research hospital in north London; their subjects were Oxford PhD candidates and eminent mycologists and young researchers who worked at the CERN particle

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accelerator. A partial replication of a study that was originally conducted in the 1960s: the participants were given a low dose of LSD, eye masks and headphones, and encouraged to focus on the deepest theoretical problems of their research. They emerged – most of them – with very interesting things to say.

But the writer finds it troubling, this influx of the moneyed, this seemingly unquestioned invoking of frontiers. They like to call in the Greeks too, these men: naming their companies after ancient mystery cults, initiation rites.

At present, her husband is on a sabbatical from his academic work, partly funded by an English billionaire with an interest in the numinous. The writer went along to his house once: a fifty-bedroom mansion with its own deer park and a temple designed by Lutyens in the garden. The billionaire had invited some of the world's leading anthropologists, cultural historians, neuro-psychopharmacologists, ethnobotanists and psychiatrists to a symposium to discuss the ontological status of entheogenic entity encounters.

She was sixteen weeks pregnant by then, and soon tired of the presentations, and hid in her bedroom during the evenings, reading Jane Austen while the other guests drank wine and whisky and wandered around the grounds.

But she had forgotten this conversation about Kerouac until recently, when she was listening to an episode of a podcast in which two sexy-voiced, smart young women sit in a studio in east London and debate the relative literary merits of certain books. In this particular episode the two young women discussed whether you should ever trust a man who liked Kerouac.

No. They decided. *Definitely not.* And then laughed together as though to say *surely that much is obvious?*

The writer had felt somehow exposed, hearing this, as though everything that she was feeling, all the terrible heartbreak she

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was trying to contain, might somehow have been obviated if she'd had better taste in literary men.

But the truth is the writer doesn't mind Kerouac. Or she didn't use to. When she was a teenager, she even had a post-card with a quote from *On the Road* on her wall:

The only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved . . . the ones who . . . burn, burn, burn, like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars . . .

On the screen, the children are back in their beds. They have saved the day, or the night, or both, and are tucked up in their pyjamas.

Mumma?

Yep?

Can I watch another cartoon?

Yep.

The writer brings up the next episode – 'Catboy and Master Fang'.

But I don't want to watch this one. I already watched *this* one, Mumma.

It's all we've got, sweetheart.

MI-ILK, shouts her daughter. I WANT MILK!

Across the aisle the sleeping man stirs, opens one eye.

Lo siento, the woman says to him. I'm sorry.

The man says nothing, just looks out of the window, gauging the route – a highway now, pylons moving across the landscape.

Cerca, he says. Una hora. Más o menos.

Sí, cerca, the writer agrees.

The man closes his eye again and appears to go back to sleep.

This man is in his seventies, although he looks twenty years younger. He has a large, full-lipped mouth, slightly turned down at the edges, which lends him an expression of constant

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wry amusement. His skin is unlined. He wears a black down jacket over a white cotton shirt and trousers. The trousers are embroidered with deer in vibrant shades of pink and purple and the deer are leaping across the hems. On his feet he wears huaraches – leather sandals made with car-tyre soles. He is, in the language of his people – the Wixárika – a mara'akame. A shaman. He is not what one might expect, though, this man. He is not in the business of making anyone feel comfortable. He is fond of jokes – the cruder the better. During daylight hours his tongue is firmly in his cheek. He is not available on any website. He is not seeking any five-star reviews.

This man also stayed up around the fire. Several generations of his family were there alongside him: his son, his son's wife, four of their seven children. He sang five songs to mark the passing of the night, his voice broken in all the right places – low then high, low then high again – and in between the songs those present, Mexican, French, Swedish, German, Senegalese, British, Colombian, sat close to the fire, drew closer to the flames, spoke prayers out loud or silently, sang their own songs, gave offerings of chocolate or tobacco, asked for healing, offered thanks. Behaved, generally, as though five hundred years of modernity and the scientific method and iPhones and aeroplanes had failed to occur, or had been cast out, in the firelight and the starlight high in this sheltered bowl of these mountains of the Sierra Madre Occidental.

The last song this man sang was just before the dawn, and at the end of his singing he walked slowly around the circle of people and passed feathers over their skin and the skin of their children, drawing them slowly across their cheeks – feathers that smelled of animals and sweat and grease. He sucked along the length of them, extracting small crystals, which were offered to the fire. Then, while it was still dark, this man

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gathered up his few things and led his family down the mountain, ready for the journey to the coast. His son and his son's wife and their children are way ahead somewhere now, travelling in a pickup truck, the kids hunkered down in the back.

They have been doing the same thing, this man and his ancestors, this singing and offering to the fire, if carbon dating of the ash in their ceremonial hearths is to be believed, for many thousands of years. The indigenous group to which they belong was one of the very few unconquered by the Spanish – desert nomads who retreated to the high Sierra to escape the colonizers' gunpowder and torture and coercion. And the route they have taken in this white van, these last ten days, across central and northern and western Mexico, from Zacatecas to the desert of San Luis Potosí, to the high Sierra Madre Occidental and down to the sea, is an ancient pilgrimage route. Although they never used to do it with a ragtag bunch from three continents in white vans hired in Guadalajara; they used to walk.

The writer is aware of the improbability of it all. This journeying. This pilgrimage. The temptation to put it all in inverted commas. Aware of the risk of it appearing ridiculous, a post-modern conundrum, the beginning of a joke:

What brings a Mexican man, a Colombian man, a Senegalese woman, a French woman, a German woman, an English woman and two English men, a Swedish man, two children and a seventy-year-old shaman to a van on a highway in the state of Nayarit in Mexico in the early afternoon on a day at the beginning of spring, at the beginning of the third decade of the twenty-first century?

The writer has gleaned snippets of other stories, fragments, guesses as to why each of the other travellers is here. The Swedish man who works in an office in Stockholm and who has spoken of a depression so bad he wanted to kill himself. The German woman, in her late forties, who looks much older,

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her face ravaged by a thousand sorts of pain. The Senegalese woman who speaks hardly at all in the company of men, but who came alive while cooking the other night, telling the writer the tale of how she came to be here, how she met her Mexican husband by the side of the road in Senegal, how she fell in love with him and left everything she knew, her family compound and mother and cousins and her aunties, for a life in a small house on the edge of a Mexican city. How, despite the long days travelling, the lack of comfort, the lack of sleep, she is here on this journey for her daughter. To give the offerings. To ask for protection.

Yes, the writer agreed. That was why she was here too. To give the offerings. To ask for protection. Yes. Yes.

There are many ways of explaining her own presence in the back of the van, many places the story could start.

You could tell the truth, hands up; say the woman is a writer. That she is here in Mexico to research and write a novel – a novel she is struggling to know quite how to begin.

But even that would not be the whole truth – the real story starts many years before.

If you were to tell it in the briefest, most linear way, you could say that the writer and her husband tried to have a child for seven years. In those seven years they tried everything, charts and diets and drugs and apps and needles, but nothing worked. Then, one day, the husband was contacted by the young Mexican man in the front of the van. He was working with an indigenous group from northern Mexico. They wanted to come to the UK. He had been told that her husband was the sort of person who might be able to write a letter of introduction on special headed university paper, the sort which would help usher a Wixárika shaman through UK immigration. Might her husband help?

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And so it was that the writer found herself, several years ago now, sitting around a fire, praying for a child.

This act, this *prayer*, was not something that came easily – not at all. How on earth were you supposed to pray? Who on earth, after two thousand years of Christianity and patriarchy, were you supposed to be praying to? Who was supposed to be listening? God? The fire? The blue deer which was sacred to the Wixárika but had nothing to do with her cultural heritage at all? And what right had she at this late stage in the game of colonialism and violence and dispossession to sit by fires with indigenous shamans and ask for what she wanted?

Nonetheless, all else having failed, she did as she was instructed. She tried to pray. Later, after the ceremony was done, the shaman laid her down in a small room, burned charcoal, then bent towards her, sucked along the length of a feather and extracted what appeared to be small crystals from her womb. He looked at the crystals, speaking quietly to himself.

A year ago, the writer visited the high Sierra for the first time. This visit was non-negotiable. Having prayed for a child, their child having come, there was another side of the bargain. It did not involve money, or not directly. It involved sacrifice. It involved taking their daughter to Mexico to give thanks.

Soon after they arrived in the mountain village, she and her husband were told to buy a sheep. When she first heard this, the writer laughed – *you're kidding, right?* But the shaman and his family were far from kidding. They were as serious as could be.

The animal was killed in a small ceremony at the wooden cross in the village square. Her daughter was unselfconsciously curious, sitting on her father's shoulders, wearing her pink fireman's sunhat, watching as the sheep twitched with the last of its life. Its blood was collected in a small gourd bowl, and the men dipped their feathers into the thick red liquid, dabbing it

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onto coins, onto their skin, onto anything they wished to bless. Watching the sheep die, its big black eye rolling to the sky, the woman was surprised. She had always thought of sacrifice as something abstract, something immaterial – but there were few things more material than watching an animal die.

The sheep was taken back to the compound where the women of the family butchered it quietly, efficiently, placing it in a large pot with vegetables and water, sealing it with dough and cooking it for hours over the fire. Later that evening many more people appeared, carrying plastic plates, sitting with huge bottles of Coke and Fanta and Sprite and piles of tortillas, waiting to be doled out some mutton stew – waiting to eat the flesh of the sheep that was killed to give thanks for their daughter's life.

Despite their down jackets and pickup trucks and mobile phones, the Wixárika live entwined in older, wilder logics: reciprocity, sacrifice. A sun which does not rise by right. A sun you must sing to. A sun you must thank.

In the side pocket of the woman's bag are several small gourd bowls: xukuri, each the size of an adult palm. On the inside of these bowls are beeswax figures – they were told to make them, yesterday afternoon, sitting in the thatched shade of a hut. Told to shape the beeswax into a deer, a sheaf of corn, into figures made to represent their family. The writer fretted over hers: it wasn't neat enough, clear enough – her deer looked wonky. She wasn't even totally sure what a corn sheaf looked like. But she did her best to form the images, pressing them against the husked skin of the gourd.

They are to release them, she knows, these votive offerings, onto the water: when they reach the white rock, in a few hours' time.

In his own bag her husband carries a candle – stitched carefully with a blue ribbon: the third of three. The first was left in

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the desert, a week ago now, the second at the summit of a sacred mountain, El Quemado, the third, the only one remaining now, will be offered to the sea.

The van is slowing, turning off the highway into a petrol station. On the other side of a forecourt there is a store. Not an OXXO, but it might do.

Her husband pulls up at a pump, leans out of the window and asks the attendant to fill it up.

The mara'akame opens one eye, and stares out at the bare concrete forecourt. Muy bonito, he says, drily, before shutting his eye again.

The woman's husband appears at their window. He leans in through the open glass, pulls a face at their daughter, and she looks up, delighted, putting her little hands out to press her father's cheeks.

Dada!!

It is as though they have not seen each other for months, for years, this giddy fizzing forcefield of their mutual physical delight.

You two okay back here? he says.

Hot.

Yeah. Did the air con help?

Sort of. Can you come and keep an eye while I go and look for milk?

Sure.

The writer scrabbles in the seat pocket for her wallet, then picks her way past feet and bags and dusty blankets to the tarmac outside. The sun is searing, bouncing off the petrol pumps, the oil pooled on the ground. The heat is intense. Her husband has come over to the passenger side. He stretches, and she can see the edge of his torso. The pale flesh where it disappears into his jeans. He is wearing jeans, boots, a bandana tied around

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his neck – a black shirt with embroidery on it like a cowboy might wear. A baseball cap. Comedy sunglasses bought at a roadside stall somewhere on the journey – ridiculous, unfeasible, the sort of mirrored sunglasses a woman in the 1980s might have worn. Somehow, just about, he pulls it off.

Not far now, he says, from the edge of his yawn.

Yeah. You want anything from the shop?

He shrugs. Water?

Sure.

They have taken to talking like this. Like characters in a play. Minimalist. Self-conscious. In a way, precise.

She hesitates – she used to put her hands on his cheeks. She used to put her hands on his neck. She used to put her hands on the place where his torso dives into his jeans. They would kiss sometimes, for hours and hours. The almost-delirium of his touch. Now they just nod at each other, as though they are distant, cordial, acquaintances.

She makes her way across the forecourt to the toilet. She is still wearing the clothes she sat up in last night: leggings for warmth, a long skirt, a long-sleeved thermal vest. In the stall she peels off the thick leggings, then the vest, prickly with static and sweat. She uses the toilet and goes to wash her hands in the sink. Her face in the little mirror looks startled – eyes wary, hair thick with dirt, lips chapped and cracked almost to bleeding.

A small smear of lurid green soap is released by the dispenser. In her head, as she washes her hands, the face of the British prime minister appears – his clown face – telling her to sing Happy Birthday twice. Being a good girl, she does so.

Last time she was near Wi-Fi, three days ago, she managed to look at the news. It was clear that what had seemed, before they left Mexico City a week before, to be something that

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might easily be contained, was rapidly morphing into something else: empty supermarket shelves across England, intensive care units overwhelmed in Italy. No toilet paper or hand sanitizer left in the shops. A British prime minister addressing the nation on the need for washing hands for twenty seconds – *the length of time it takes to sing Happy Birthday twice.*

Happy Birthday to you.

Happy Birthday to you.

Happy Birthday to yo-ou. Happy Birthday to you.

She was forty-five a few months ago. More than halfway through her life.

If she is lucky.

This plague, though, this *novel coronavirus*, is not the particular horseman the writer has been preparing for.

Not since the summer before last, when, in the middle of a heatwave, she read a paper by an English academic which predicted ice-free Arctic summers in the next decade – multiple breadbasket failure, the likelihood of *near-term societal collapse*.

Not since, soon after that, she watched a YouTube video of a middle-aged woman in her living room, giving a talk entitled 'Heading for Extinction and What to Do About It'. The woman had a PhD in molecular biophysics. She spoke calmly about the recent data – how there was more carbon in the air than at any point since the Permian period, when 97 per cent of life on earth became extinct, gassed by hydrogen sulphide. How the earth was already well into the sixth mass extinction, and how this biological annihilation was accelerating. How the precautionary principle had been abandoned by those who governed in favour of capitulation to fossil fuel lobbies and short-term gain. This woman spoke of hedge fund managers, CEOs of brokerage houses, who were putting the finishing touches to their underground bunkers and wondering how they might

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