

## Northern Rocks by Shelley Silas

The earth moved. Really it did. Twice.

At the exact moment the earthquake hit the second time, Jimmy Mulgrave was in his hotel room making love to a sweet seventeen-year-old girl he'd met earlier that evening. He wasn't sure what was more surprising, the girl or the earthquake. Jimmy wasn't the kind of man to have illicit affairs. He wasn't the kind of man to have any affairs. Ever. This was more a challenge than anything else, a test to himself, for himself. A how-far-can-I-go kind of thing.

He was up for the week, training a group of assorted workers from various local businesses; managers, sales assistants, you name it, they were all there, taking part in his five day workshop on how to improve your sales and make your customers love you, imparting what knowledge he had about client customer relations. He was supposed to be the expert, that's why they'd hired him. Him. No one else, just him. Jimmy Mulgrave, team builder extraordinaire, husband and father extraordinaire. Self-made man, whose earnings topped half a million last year. Everyone who knew him said he'd be earning a cool million by the time he was forty-five. Not bad for a one-man operation, with low overheads and no other employees to worry about.

His was the success his friends dreamed about. Jimmy had two houses – in the south of England and France – membership to an exclusive sports club, a new car every other year. He wasn't that unaware of his carbon footprint or tyre mark. His next model would be part petrol part electric. It was already on order. If his family wanted to ski he'd fly them off to an elite resort, European or American, no matter, he could afford it. If they wanted sun he'd catch a flight to a hot destination, private apartment that opened on to a beach, with a cook as part of the deal. Breakfast lunch and dinner served on

silver plates, fruit picked from trees in the property's own orchard, and only when it was absolutely ripe. His was the perfect life, he wanted for nothing. And that was the problem. He didn't want to be perfect. And he was too young to have it all. Forty-one next July, his friends privately envied him, publicly applauded him. They wanted to know what his secret was. What did Jimmy Mulgrave have that no one else had and why was he the chosen one? Chosen for this life. He was, after all, an ordinary bloke from a north London suburb; his parents moved down south from up north, his baker father married his nurse mother. Death and dough were in Jimmy Mulgrave's bones. He watched his parents grow old before their time, hard working hands rough with courage. Dutch courage, because his grandfather on his mother's side was from a small town in the north of Holland. Strange how both his parents used their hands in their chosen work, him to knead and her to be needed. Jimmy knew he would never go hungry or be without care if he was sick. His stomach was always full, his health attended to with precision and love. But when it came to communicating, his parents lacked confidence of any kind. His father would sit for hours, reading or listening to the radio, never commenting, just smiling, quietly to himself, very occasionally recounting a funny anecdote to his mother, but in translation the humour was always lost. His mother was often too tired to talk, spending her days nagging and placating and paying tribute to the relatives and friends of people she'd known for the briefest of time. But this wasn't communicating, this was doing a job. At home, Jimmy's mother would knit and cook, and read him bedtime stories. His favourite was Green Higgs and Ham. She never baked, that was her husband's sport. A sponge every Saturday, with strawberry jam unevenly spread between two thick wedges of cake. Cream on top to finish it off. Their empty plates spoke more than ever spilled from their mouths. And when Jimmy's father died prematurely, because he couldn't tell his own nurse wife that he wasn't feeling well, because he literally didn't have the words, his gravestone was blank except for his name, birth and death dates. So it was up to Jimmy to take control, to ensure that others didn't fall by the wayside of silent neglect. It was his job to make them speak up and speak out. And if he could encourage

more business, even better. Communication was his key word. Now his diary was full from January to December, he worked all the days and hours he could, he'd never taken a sickie in his life, came in with a broken leg once, and dosed himself up when he had a temperature of one hundred and four. One thing Jimmy never did was let people down.

He'd been booked for this job for a year now, squeezed in between a week in Germany working with a group of neo-Nazis and local rabbis, and three days back in the UK working with the Prime Minister and his staff. No job was too much or too little for Jimmy. Politics didn't come into it. It was about the people. And if someone genuinely couldn't afford his rates, he asked them to pay what they could. When it came to charity, Jimmy believed it began with others and then himself. Which is partly why none of his friends could comprehend the secret of his incredible success.

When the organisers booked him into a suite at a five star hotel overlooking a shallow stretch of water, with breakfast and dinner included, and free wi fi, he'd asked, "Why?"

"Because we thought we should. We thought you might like it."

"Always ask the client what they want, never assume. Spending more on me means spending less on you. I know all about tax-deductible items, but I shouldn't be one of them."

"Right," they said, "So where would you like to stay?"

"Anywhere else. But I don't like five star hotels, they are too impersonal. And not a B&B. I don't like staying with other families. Give me something I've never had before for under fifty pounds a night."

They didn't realise that his work had already begun, way before the workshop started. He smiled as he watched their expressions, contorted and confused, where the hell to put him? Does such a place exist?

He ended up in a leisure centre, two pools, indoor and out, sauna and jacuzzi, tennis courts, vast gym spanning the entire floor of what resembled a

gigantic hanger on two floors. There was a bar and café, free wi fi access and only ten rooms. His was number two, the penultimate room at the end of a wide corridor, carpeted in lush cherry. Rooms were on either side, doors directly opposite each other. Jimmy liked his room, simple but clean, TV with Sky, a small bar filled with drinks and snacks, free soaps and shampoos, plenty of white towels, ample lights and mirrors and, from what he could tell, the sound proofing was sound.

He arrived the day before, evening drive from the airport to his accommodation in a hire car he paid for himself. His room was warm, his stomach empty. He needed food. He unpacked, he liked to make himself at home, uncreased his clothes, removed his shoes from their soft white bags. He'd brought one pair for casual wear and one for a more formal night out. He liked to give the impression of being laid back but in charge. Always in charge. And it worked. The thing about Jimmy was he paid great attention to detail, from the small stitches on his shoes, alternating colours for alternating styles, to the glass buttons on his shirt. He'd brought swimming trunks in case he felt the urge for an early morning swim, and maybe this time he would do it. He'd never been a brilliant swimmer, in truth it was the one thing he wasn't much good at. His only imperfection. He couldn't quite get the hang of the breathing, so he didn't do it. His wife liked beach holidays but not for the salty spray of the Med or Caribbean. Her feet barely crossed from sand to sea. Of course she made use of the pool, always private, but she would lie on a lilo, sun tan milk sticky on her flesh, and revel in the extra-strong sun as it reflected off the cool, clear water. Skin cancer was something other people got. His sons were into more earthy sports, football and rugby, so Jimmy had no reason to get it right.

When he'd sorted his clothes, underwear and socks on one shelf, shirts neatly folded on another, two sweaters below them and his trousers – one pair for every day – hanging up by their hems, he wandered into the bar and bought a pint and a bag of crisps. Prawn cocktail flavour, because even

though there was something quite sickly about them, he enjoyed the memories that came with the sweet sour taste. Like now, sitting on a beach with his brother, ten and twelve year olds together on the sand at Alnmouth, straining their young boy eyes to see the land that was far away, across the water where the big ships went. Or student days, in smoky bars after late night concerts, when a kebab wasn't enough to fill the gap.

That was when he first spotted the girl. Sitting alone in front of the wide plasma screen, hair wet, a mermaid on dry land, orange juice and bowl of curly fries, which she ate with her fingers, dipping them into a pot of ketchup and nibbling along the fry, Bugs Bunny style. Around her, on sofas and chairs, high tables and high stools, were an assortment of people, some of whom looked like they knew each other, others, like Jimmy, who were total strangers. She stared at the screen, not appearing to take anything in. Was she waiting, he wondered, for someone? Her hair stuck to her head, her eyes were bright, alive. He looked down to the floor beside her, at a red sports bag, zip undone. He could just make out a towel inside and pair of goggles. It was seven thirty. He needed food. He went to the bar to order, a portion of fries, just like hers, and some noodles with vegetables and slices of beef. As he paid, the girl walked past, nodded to the man behind the bar, who said, "Same time tomorrow?"

She nodded and walked quickly away, bag swinging by her side.

Jimmy looked at his watch again. Seventy forty.

"Pool open late?" he asked.

"Yeah, until eleven. Indoor and out." He paused. "Heated of course."

Damn, Jimmy thought, now I have to make a choice.

"Outdoors is better," the barman said, "It's quieter. But some people are strange about swimming outdoors, like it's only something you do on holiday."

"Yeah," Jimmy said.

He finished his beer, asked how long his food would take, then he walked quickly to the sports shop, open for another twenty minutes. His swimming

trunks were old, out of date. His eyes followed the assortment on sale; board shorts, swimming trunks, briefs. Water shorts, fitted trunks, hip shorts, surf shorts, retro trunks. Which in his language meant showing a lot or showing nothing at all. He fingered the fabric, lycra, loose cotton, high leg, too fitted for him. He wanted to swim, not bring on a heart attack. He opted for a pair of black loose fitted beach shorts. He felt more comfortable in them. On the counter were two for one flip-flops and goggles. He bought one and got the other free. He liked the accoutrements that came with sport, the clothes and shoes. They were almost as important as the sport itself. Made him feel like a pro. Tomorrow night he would go swimming. It was seeing that girl that made him want to go, her freshness and vitality made him want to lose himself for an hour or so, under water, away from his world, hidden and out of sight.

He slept peacefully. The food had been good, no need for Gaviscon tonight. He woke at seven, showered, had breakfast, a full English today and then fruit or porridge or toast and jam the rest of the week. He didn't want to pile on the pounds. The first day of a new job was always exhausting. Getting to know new people, new people getting to know him. At first they were tentative, wondering what they had let themselves in for. But by lunchtime Jimmy had them eating out of the palms of their own hands. He knew this was going to be another successful week.

They finished at five, he had a report to write up and tomorrow's session to think about. He didn't believe in too much pre-planning. He liked to know who he was working with first. Different people had different needs. Tomorrow there'd be one or two new members. When the group asked if he wanted to go for a drink, he opted out, said he was tired. In reality this was what always happened. They bonded, wanted him with them, as a subconscious caretaker, but it was the worst thing he could do. For himself and for them. So he held them to a drink tomorrow. Which he knew, when tomorrow came, and he had provided them with homework that would make them groan, they'd all rush off and forget about drinks.

Six thirty. Report written up, tomorrow's session more or less ready, Jimmy walked down to the pool, picking up a towel and a lock from reception on his way. The place was relatively quiet, but it was a Monday night. The same man who had served him last night recognised his familiar face, nodded and smiled. Jimmy lifted his head up, carried on walking, to the men's locker room, where he changed quickly, slipped on his new trunks, a perfect fit, they felt good. He tied a towel around himself, took his goggles and walked towards the indoor pool, his feet not used to flip-flops. He looked around, not too obviously, but there was no sign of the girl. Should he start inside and work his way out? Make a decision, Jimmy, he said. He walked straight to the back doors, pushed and was outside, cool spring air a shock but not totally unpleasant. Steam skimmed off the top of the pool. Three elderly women swam as if they had all the time in the world, arms and feet un-coordinated, heads covered with plastic floral caps, faces well above the water line. There was no way they were going to let that mascara smudge. In a jacuzzi beside the pool, two men sat and chatted and laughed out loud. As Jimmy adjusted his goggles, the men went inside. As Jimmy slipped into the pool, no shallow end, the women waited five minutes then left as well. Jimmy alone in the pool. Partly scared in case his attempt to self-teach himself went horribly wrong, partly excited because he had the entire pool to himself, all twenty-five metres of warm water. He dunked his head, his body heated up now, and stood looking at the clock. Seven o'clock precisely. Goggles in place, he put his head under, and that was the moment the earthquake hit. The first one. Jimmy took in a mouthful of lightly chlorinated water as he came back up, the water swaying from side to side, this is the stuff of surfers' dreams, he thought, wondering if he had time to buy a board from the shop before it closed. The rumble continued, Jimmy stayed where he was. Inside people pointed at him. Jimmy was staying exactly where he was. He liked it here. He felt safe. It was only water, it couldn't harm him. He clung to the ladder and listened as the earth rumbled beneath and around and cars hooted and people shouted and birds races around the sky. They say your life flashes past you when you're drowning. Cakes and late night stories of Green Hegg and

Ham. Punch ups with his brother, then sharing sweets to make it up. His father dead in the garden, his mother at a loss for words. No words on his father's gravestone. His wife and kids, his new car on order, the kitchen tap that needed changing, his whole world, all of it, here in the water with him. It lasted all of fifty seconds. So much life in so little time. How was it possible?

Later, on the news, they would say it measured 5.3 on the Richter scale.

When it was all over the elderly group of women applauded Jimmy from behind glass doors.

"How brave," they said.

"How stunning."

"How utterly amazing."

And Jimmy nodded because they were absolutely right. And from the group of women, a young girl appeared, in a two-piece costume. She walked straight towards Jimmy.

"Fancy a swim?" she said, and disappeared under the water as if it were her natural place. When she came up, Jimmy was in the same position, half way up the ladder. The group had dispersed, and the girl, Cat she said her name was, short for Catrina or Catherine? He didn't like to ask. It seemed rude.

"They call me the angel of the north," she said, arms outspread, legs together.

"Appropriate," he said, "what with it being not that far from here."

"You're not a local are you?"

"No," he said.

"Where from?"

He cleared his throat. "London."

"Ah well, there is life north of there."

Why did everyone always have to say that to him? As if he didn't know.

"Up for business?" she asked.

"That's right."

"Are you going to swim or just stand there?"

"Er, yes, it's just that..."

"Nice shorts," she said, eyeing him up and down.

"Thanks. I...thanks."

"Come on then, first one across buys the round."

He didn't even try and beat her. He could barely coordinate his breathing let alone fake it and pretend he could swim and breathe and get his arms and legs in the right place at the right time.

"I can't...you know...breathe properly."

"Probably because no one has ever taught you."

"Probably," he said.

She looked at him, smiled, said, "come on then."

"What?"

"I'll teach you. If you want to learn."

"Sure. Yeah. I mean, of course, if you don't mind."

"Yes would have been fine," she said.

"Yes," he said.

"Those trunks are too sexy for the man inside them not to know what he's doing."

She walked him up to one end of the pool, and showed him what to do. Breathe in, head under, breathe out, like a horse she said, through your mouth and nose. He tried it a few times, on the fifth attempt he came out of the water smiling.

"Make sense now?"

"Oh God, it's so simple."

"Yeah," she said, "isn't it. Now swim a whole length like that."

She watched as he started, tentative at first, not sure he wanted her to watch him make a fool of himself. And then he swam, head up and under, breathing out and then in and not choking, not gasping for breath and then his

hands and legs and everything, together. Brave, he thought. Stunning. Utterly amazing.

After half an hour and twenty-five lengths she left the pool, signalled to him that it was time for that drink. After an hour, a pint and shared bowl of curly fries she asked to see his room, and he led her all the way there. This perfect, never done wrong man. Although, he thought, now that my only imperfection, being unable to swim properly, breathe properly, has been remedied, I need a new imperfection. And she was it.

"I'm Cat," she said, "Short for Catriona."

He joked, asked to see her passport. She knew what he was thinking. Underage girl trying it on.

"I'll show you mine if you show me yours," she said.

"My what?"

"Driving licence. Just to make sure you're who you say you are."

Later, she said, "You done this before?"

"What?"

"Cheated on your wife?"

"No," he said. "Never."

"So what is it? Young flesh turn you on?"

"You wouldn't understand," he said. How could he explain to her, his need for imperfection, his craving to get something wrong, just once, to slip out of his skin and into someone else's. Just for once. To do it wrong, to be unpredictable. It wasn't because of her youth, she was in the right place at the right time. And so was he. That was all.

"Close your eyes," she said.

"Why?"

"Just trust me. And keep breathing."

"Okay," he said.

The second earthquake happened soon after that. She on top of him, him breathing deeply, their bodies entwined like seaweed caught up and twisted as one. He'd never felt anything like it before. Even in the early days

with his wife. And yes, his memory wasn't that good. And yes, he did feel guilty and yes part of him wished he hadn't needed to be imperfect, but a greater part of him was glad. It meant he was normal, had normal feelings, was just like everyone else.

"Did the earth move?" she asked later, when he'd opened cold beer and ordered another bowl of curly fries.

"Oh yes," he said, "It did."

"And we survived," she said, "That's good."

He never saw her again. She didn't come back to the leisure centre while he was there, he had no last name for her, no number, no sense of where she might live. And maybe that was the way it was supposed to be. Maybe that was the way. Maybe?

## Ends

Northern Rocks by Stella Duffy

She has found that asking them directly doesn't really work. She scares them off apparently. Something to do with the fairy tale version. She is not the fairy tale version, she is real. In many ways it would be easier if she were the fairy tale, the princess, the daughter of the Mermaid King. All she'd need to do would be walk again into the watery depths and call out "Daddy, I'm home" and they would lay on a welcoming party, roll out the red carpet, feast on the fatted sea-calf for the prodigal daughter returned. Unfortunately, her father is long dead, of his bones are coral made, there is nowhere else to go, and the red carpet years ago faded to a dank grey. There was a kingdom, once, but

much time has passed since, and she was a different woman then. She was not a woman then.

Then. In the sea, off Alnmouth, long before the shoreline changed, down from Holy Isle, in from the sea. She was there, happy there. They all were, this bright band of a happy extended family, the king and his many daughters, swimming fearlessly, recklessly, wreck-lessly, steering the would-be wrecks back into calmer waters, deeper waters, safer waters. It was lovely. All of it, the whole coastline, right down to icecreams at Whitley Bay. There was nothing they wanted, and they provided a valuable service, these good people of the sea. There was much to be thankful for, and little to want. It was all good.

And then, the earth moved. Of its own volition, on its own terms. Moving the water with it. People forget, when they hear the earth has moved, that the water which holds us, holds us up from under, in from the sides, down with the rain so we are not turned to dust and blown away, the water is also moved when the earth moves. And the north rocked side to side and the water rocked miles wide, and the shoreline changed and her people were out at sea and she was left stranded, banded, on the other side of the sand bar. Here. This side, the not-sea side, land-side, land-slide-side. All by herself and nowhere to go, a fish out of water. So she climbed out of the water, beached herself, landed. Here.

And the thing is, the thing is, the thing that the fairy tale doesn't say is ... you can never go back. Not once the steps have been taken and she did take the steps. She had to. There wasn't much else to do, and washed ashore

for the fishermen to find you in the morning, that's no mermaid's dream date. There's plenty of fish pie to be made from one girl's tail. Steak, sushi, fish fingers from she who has no toes. And so it goes.

She did what any sensible daughter of the sea, brought up walked by a wise mermaid King would do. She walked inland. Can't get back to the water, the rocks of the land in the way, might as well go in. Those sirens, they're the real myth, there's no mermaid worth her salt would bother to sit on some old rock, day in day out, going nowhere, doing nothing, just checking her hair was nice enough, her singing voice bright enough. No, these girls are brought up to do far more. So, dragging herself from the water, she walked ashore and yes, back then, it did hurt. Every faltering step was, as the story goes, a knife blade in the sole she did not yet have, half steps, she couldn't take a whole step, these were baby steps, learning steps, side steps, trailing a tail steps.

And as she walked the tail trailed away. Because that is what they do. We all leave trails of tails, failed tales, told tales, we leave them all behind us. A mermaid is no different. You think because she is cold-blooded she is any different? Think again, friends. She still bleeds red. Very.

So, back to the beginning, while she would find it easier, could find it easier to tell them directly, to simply ask them for what she needs, she doesn't. It is easier to take what she requires and go, it is easier than talking, than explaining, the how and the why and the where from. They'd never believe her anyway. These men she finds to bring to herself in the long dark night, are not ones for making leaps of faith. If they eventually understand what has happened, then all well and good. She is not hiding anything, they

could work it out if they wanted. She'd quite like them to work it out. Like they might in a gym, working it out. Or in a pool. A swimming pool.

He was up for the week. She'd done a little research, looked inside his bag – amazing how often a man will just hand his bag over to any girl who happens to keep her eyes downcast and her head above water, the chambermaid's uniform rendering her invisible as radio waves. She checked the bag, nothing new to swim in. Except the pool. But she knew better than that, knew more about him from one look, that's all it took. He might swim naked one day, privately, but here he would want to look good, look good for her. She watched him go into the shop, imagine himself wearing this and that, looking like this and that. He chose this. She chose that. Chose him. She could tell he was good – good at his work, good at his job, good at the selling and the telling and the making better. He was the kind of man who could take other men and help them find themselves, wind themselves up to a frenzy of belief and hope and satisfaction and then come home and still find time for his children, his wife, his life. A good man, kind man, really very fine man. They were the best ones, she'd found.

The ones who always played around, fucked around, known on the town, they were OK, if she had to, if she had no other choice, if it was nearing the end of the moon's cycle and she was crying out for the water she needed, crying out in very real pain, then yes, one of the ordinary men would do. But she preferred a good man, family man. It worked better that way. They had more to offer, more to give up.

So. She tried it on, tried him on. And he was a lovely fit. Like a glove. Like love. Like lust more like. More like than love, more lust than like, more life than the wife he'd left at home. And he was no different to any of the others, what she brought them, what she offered them, it made them happy. It helped them breathe. They felt more alive with her. It was the danger, the deception, the doing wrong. It made them feel good because they felt bad. And sometimes they would cry a little, from the feeling good about being bad, and then they'd feel better, and she became wetter with their tears and then she felt better too. Much better. So it was good all round. Except for the wives. But they would never know unless their men went home and gave it up in the ego-frenzy that is self-confession, telling truths to make the wives feel worse and themselves feel better, when what they didn't know couldn't hurt and what isn't told can't damage ... whatever, she was not responsible for what happened next. She was only responsible for what happens now.

Now. She allows him to find her, sitting alone, with wet hair, in front of a plasma screen. She has juice and chips. She does not really like to eat much, nibbles the chip, just. She does not need food. Or rather, food is not what she needs.

What happens next. She is in the pool with this man, in the water with him, under water with him, she is teaching him the tricks that come naturally to her, that are her first and second nature. The trick of breathing under water. Breathing out under water so the in-breath is above, the out is under,

and the two are evenly paced and simple, so simple that he finds, astonishingly, he can forget what is in and which is out and just be there, under and over, over and above, the water holding him up, the air holding him down, swimming between two elements. She teaches him the trick of flowing with the current of the pool rather than fighting against it, of knowing that even small bodies of water have tides, our bodies of water have tides, and are pushed and pulled with the moon. In simple and deft movements she shows him how to sense the tide in the pool, to let the water feel his body, flow through his body, pull his body along. He is used to leading, this man, loves leading, showing, explaining, training, now he allows himself to be led. Both by the woman, this lovely young woman, and by the water, this cool fresh water. He lies in the water, he lies in her, he could get used to this lying. Will get used to this lying.

What happens after that. They spend a glorious night together, in the water and in the sheets. They are wet dry wet again, warm again, come again, call again, yours again. They are in each others' arms, legs, bodies, twisted and turning as the world turns, the sun rises, the water flows, the earth moves. In their night in this strange-hotel bed they rock the north, east, south and west of each other's points, playing skin on skin, flesh to flesh, touch teeth touch tongue touch touching. Such touching. So touching. The way he reaches out for her hand, for her body, for her smooth young woman's flesh in the cool dark night, reaches out for what is not his, cannot be his, for what he doesn't even really want. Not her, not her specifically. She could be anyone, anyone

other than his wife. She knows this too of course. He too could be anyone, any one man who was looking to run away and into her arms, flesh, body, ready.

And then. In the middle of the night the earth moves again, and this time they are prepared for it, use it. Use the pull of the earth as they used the pull of the tide in the pool, use the rocking rolling earth to rock them into each other, here in the cooler north, where the pole is closer, the sky is wider, and the light lasts longer. Each one opens their arms, opens their bodies wide to the other and they rock until the other is completely taken in, taken over, done. It is done.

The morning comes fast. He has work he must go to, a day with the people who need him. He leaves her sleeping, thinks she is sleeping, in the bed and walks a stumbling tread to the shower. His limbs feel heavy, he is tired, that was good, just what he needed – maybe - but a little more sleep would have helped as well. He does not look behind him, gets on with planning his day as the water washes him clean, washes her from him, away from him, much further away than a bed in the next room.

In the bed she stretches, she is not sleeping. Her body too, is stiff, sore, but then her body is always sore in the mornings, the mornings after the nights before. So many nights before. She puts out her hand, without opening her eyes, reaches for his pillow. As she thought, hoped, the pillowcase is still damp. He cried in the night, cried out beneath her body, in pleasure, cried again, just a little, those few tears thrown up by the bliss of physical fulfilment and then, as they so often do, though they so often don't notice, the man cried

a third time in his sleep. Cried the good tears of a good man with a good wife and a good life. These are the tears she came for, the tears she needs. The salt water mix that is the sweat and the crying of a good man's regret. She knows what he is thinking. That it was worth it, their night of rocking rollicking passion. That he feels ten years younger this morning. That he has convinced himself of the value of their transaction. All of this makes sense when he is awake, when his fast brain is in action, that great intellect they pay him so well for, those brilliant strategies he employs to make other people's dreams come true. But it is in his dream that the uncertainty comes through. Came through in the tears he cried unnoticed into his hotel pillow. She noticed.

She takes off the pillow case and folds it carefully, placing it in a small plastic bag, zip-locked and see-through. A lunch bag. A freezer bag. A very ordinary bag for her very extraordinary need.

He didn't notice the missing pillow case when he came back from the shower, he did notice the missing girl. Which felt like something, something a little sore, a little unaccustomed, for a moment, and then was gone. He called his wife, told her he was missing her, gave his love to the kids, picked up his ready-packed briefcase, the one he probably wouldn't open all day anyway, he knows his mind, goes with the flow, likes to take what comes from the group and play around with it, he does not need to look at a plan. Had not planned this and it worked out fine, didn't it? And then, considering and rejecting a cold curly fry from last night's plate, he left the anonymous hotel room for a good day's work.

She had planned her day, her night. This was what she needed to do, their meeting, their joining. The full moon would show itself in the daytime sky this afternoon and she needed to be ready. She left the leisure centre that was also an hotel and went further inland, further upland. She headed away from the sea, hugging the rocky spine of the land. The walking becoming harder as she drew closer to the centre, further from the water. Eventually it became impossible to walk as it always did and she began pulling herself along with her hands, her arms, pulling herself up the hill, across the grass, on to the rock. The rock where she eventually sits, pulling herself, lifting her all too earth-bound body into place. This is her place.

The legs that were hurting so much on the journey are now her tail again, bloodied and gashed from dragging it uphill behind her. She reaches into the red rucksack she has carried on her back and pulls out a knife and the plastic bag with the just-damp pillowcase. The afternoon moon is high in the sky. The sun is warm. The rock steady. She cuts a straight seam through the centre of the flesh of the tail that reaches into the centre of her. Her fishing knife is sharp and strong. She is screaming in pain as she does it. And then, to ease her pain, and to bring her back to herself, the self she wishes to be, the only self she can be now, she takes the pillowcase from the plastic bag and wipes the cool damp of a good man's tears over her bloodied, divided tail. As far as it is possible to be from the salt water of the sea, she washes herself in the salt water tears of a good man, washing away the scales, revealing skin and bone, flesh and cold blood.

She cannot go back to the water, that is lost to her now. The earth moved and took her path away. She can't properly live on dry land either. And so, like everyone else, she finds a way that lies somewhere in between. She cannot ever really be fully happy, totally at ease, the tail always grows back, but for now, for twenty seven days, she can be human, and that makes her happy enough. And how many other people can say that? Happy enough for twenty seven days in a row. It's almost worth the trade. Almost.