

Surely, there is nothing to fear from an old tin mine, some ancient gouging out of the earth. Such a place is as dead as dead can be. But not so.

The old miners were brave and determined. They dug deep, seeking out the precious ore, scraping and exploding their way, constructing networks of tunnels, pushing forever deeper into the bowels of Mother Earth but the miners were not scientists, not students of rock formations and movements. They could not have been expected to know that mankind's endless, greedy meddling with nature would produce a planetary honeycomb of enormous, emptied caverns that one day would cause the whole kit and caboodle to sag inwards like a huge, burst football and one thing we can be sure of is that a burst football is of no use to anyone.

No burst football will spin through the heavens with beautiful, relentless precision .

Thomas was looking at the photograph of the love of his life. Ellen was resting on a wooden bench, surrounded by summer flowers, roses, geraniums and lobelia, their heady fragrance accentuated in the warmth of the day. She was happy and it showed. At her feet lay their old Labrador. Some might say his golden-haired coat was old-fashioned but Buddy was too wise to be troubled by such ideas. His mouth was open, the tongue hanging out and Thomas would swear, when questioned by the police, that

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the dog was laughing the very moment it happened. They were enjoying a holiday in Devon, he explained, his face collapsed in sadness, in the old seaside town once home to a thriving tin mine. Thomas was standing only three feet away and he remembered it was as he was looking through the camera aperture that he felt like the luckiest man on the planet, thirty or so years of closeness and love and disagreement and children fled the nest and, he thought, how did he escape, so close and yet so far, when the earth opened up and swallowed, in a blink of the eye, his reason for living. The collapse of Mother Earth should have taken him too. Instead it left him in Hell. Thomas' thoughts were disturbed by the creaking of the old gate in his front garden. With difficulty, Thomas parted the curtains. Loose curtain hooks blocked the track. The mending and repairing, the sifting and sorting, the chores that came at Thomas day by sorry day. The drip in the tap, the grass grown tall and unruly, the curtain hooks refusing to comply. The world always demanded. Ellen would be turning in her grave if she had one; her plot of land, as far as he understood it, stretched for ten miles under the surface of the earth. Some family plot, he joked with the lady in the Tesco petrol station.

A stranger was hammering at his door. He removed a woolly hat and blew his nose on it. He was doing a little dance, a mad sequence of movements, arms and legs going, all ways. Thomas was reminded of that ritualised high-kicking Irish dancing he couldn't stand. Thomas wondered if the dancer was escaping an angry partner or, perhaps, at that very moment a huge, vicious dog was chewing at the wood of the garden gate. Thomas wanted his imagined beast to barge the gate aside and grab the

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bloke by the throat a la Hound of the Baskervilles.

Thomas had no need of visitors. After three months of despair, the world held no interest for him. Indeed, had the imagined hound ripped the stranger into a million pieces, he would have been tempted to allow the beast entry to his front room.

Thomas had no reason to live but, equally, he had no reason to fear death. He pulled the snib on the door and opened it wide.

Light from the hall flooded the doorway. He saw that the stranger had a short moustache and held, not a woolly hat but a brown wig in his hand. He was wearing a long, floral dress which fell six inches below his knees.

“You're wearing a woman's dress.”

“I was on my way home from the chess club.”

“Do they think you're a woman?”

“Don't be daft. With these feet. Didn't you feel it?”

“No,” said Thomas. “Feel what?”

“Under your feet. The tremor. Look. Your lamppost's down.”

Thomas made a funny face. He had been conscious of a change in his beloved environment but had, until that moment, been unable to put his finger on the change.

That old lamppost meant a lot to Thomas. Not only had Buddy spend an inordinate time with his nose one centimetre from its base extracting information about previous doggy loiterers. The lamppost was the very spot where he first kissed Ellen before her dad turned up to whisk her home to safety. It lay dumped upon the hard tarmacadam, its individual narrative come to an end, gazing meaninglessly towards

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the night sky.

“It's happening again,” said Thomas, “It's following me to the ends of the earth.”

Powerful, gloved hands took hold of his shoulders.

“We must stay strong. There's no point in feeling sorry for ourselves. It's the wild west we're living in. Morality's gone to the dogs.”

“You ain't no safer in here than out there,” said Thomas, aware that he was sounding like a two-dimensional character in a John Wayne cowboy movie.

Just then the number 44 bus tumbled down the hill, its bright interior world in full view. The trees opposite shook and staggered and the bus was swallowed up. Just like that. Forty nine seated passengers, 15 standing passengers and one wheelchair user thrown into a deep pit.

“Nothing makes sense any more,” said the stranger.

“Like Jonah swallowed by the whale.”

“We gotta get out of this town,” said the stranger sounding like the stranger in a strange town.

“We should run as fast as we can away from here .”

They laughed as if they had just got the punchline of the funniest joke in the world.

“I've got a curry bubbling on the cooker,” said Thomas. “You fancy a bite?”

The stranger visibly relaxed.

“By the way my name's Patricia tonight.”

“Nice to meet you, Patricia tonight.”

“I could eat a horse.”

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“It's a chicken curry. Horse stew on Fridays.”

“I enjoy a beer with my curry.”

“I can rustle up a beer. You set another place at the table. Cutlery's in the drawer nearest the kitchen.”

The good earth was in open rebellion. So much rape. So much despoliation. Under our very feet the scaffolding had been weakened. Tap your toes . Dust is shaken from the roof of a million caverns. Salt. Tin. Diamonds. Gold. Oil. Gas .Water. Metals, like car brands, too many to number. The whole fucking world wanting a piece of the action. Drilling. Exploding. Pick-axing. Grabbing with bare hands. Not one inch of the earth spared if there was a dime to be made. Nobody bothered about the price to be paid for their greed. That was a worry for another generation, the four-by-four idling in the car park, the central heating turned up full in a cold snap, the mobile phone producing images which soothed the anxious mind.

Nate hated many things about his life. He hated his fair hair, thinning on top even at high school, and the vicious spots along his back and neck which refused to budge when attacked by potions and lotions He hated that his mother never heated the baked beans thoroughly and he hated his name, Nathaniel, a posh kid's name and one

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thing his parents were was not posh but most of all he hated being a deep-sea fisherman . Considering that his father and his father before him had fished the Gulf of Mexico all their working lives he knew he was in for a long, weary sadness because he couldn't stand the stink of fish. His dad and grandfather laughed at him, saying over and over again that fish didn't have any smell but Nate knew differently. Fish ,fresh or rotten, stank to hell and back.

In the end he fell out with his dad and grandfather and went to work on the oil rigs which rose from the ocean bed like a gathering of giant, alien beings. The rigs had plundered the crude oil from the belly of Mother Earth for some fifty years, a cargo so rich that America grew to be an economic giant on its profit alone.

Nate was working the rigs during the Deepwater Blowout of 2009 when 90 million gallons of the black gold spoiled the fishing grounds not only of his family but of innumerable friends and neighbours. Nate hid from the vitriole thrown his way when he bought the groceries, when he played ball with his kids. He began to feel as if he , personally, had lowered himself 30,000 feet to the sea bed and detonated a massive bomb attached to the drilling site. President Obama visited the towns, meeting folks whose livelihoods had been taken away from them but he could do nothing to stop crude oil spreading its poison along the beaches .Out at sea black pathways blossomed into fantastic shapes, telling a story but giving no answers . Nate listened to the experts spouting maths and scientific equations but he was none the wiser. Ignorance does not make a problem go away but what was worse was that understanding the problem didn't do any better.

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The drilling stretched farther beneath the seabed than the height of Mount Everest. The scientist who gave the good people the comparison looked pleased with his analogy. The good people just baffled. He told them in the crowded halls and meeting places along the Gulf towns that it was a lot of pipeline to search for faults especially when the pipe was hidden from plain sight. He spoke for an hour while a hundred thousand gallons of crude continued to bubble out. Nate sneaked into one of the talks and he could see in the quivering of voices and the shaking of hands that the engineers were terrified. One engineer was pushed on to the stage. He quivered like a reluctant child at the end of year show. His words held little comfort. A successful plugging of the leak might create an opposite reaction. The speaker paused, a young man with the faintest evidence of a growth of fair hair about his face, and the audience fidgeted in their seats ;you could hear their brains shouting “spit it out, man” He coughed and the words he spoke condemned them.

“The ocean bed itself might fracture and should that happen....”

The moisture gathering on his wispy moustache was visible in the claustrophobic heat of the school hall. He removed his glasses from his face .It was an old trick from a young man. The blur of the audience gave him the courage to speak his mind.

“ A catastrophe,”he said,”but a plug is our last chance.”

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In days the plug was lowered on to the sea bed and sealed in place. It held. The spillage ceased. In time - as is the way with humans, a disaster out of sight is out of mind, the cancer unseen is a cancer which doesn't exist- beaches were passed fit for use and the presidential arrival with his kid for a dip in the bracing ocean waves proclaimed the return of normality. The fishing boats took to the sea but the words of the young scientist knocked on the door of the subconscious and nightmares took flight among the good people. Mothers dreamed of crude oil dripping from kitchen taps. Dads opened car doors to find the inside filled to the brim with polluted sea water. In primary schools kids drew detailed pictures of ten-legged creatures of the deep attacking the tourist beaches.

And then on August 5th 2023 in a BP office in Houston, Jamie Hertz witnessed the moment of surrender and moments of surrender stand out in your mind for all the obvious reasons. Jamie was chewing a sad excuse for a cheese and tomato sandwich when an emergency code was triggered on his computer screen. He, like all the staff, had been trained for this very moment but modelling a situation is a very different experience from the event itself; modelling does not release a barrage of chemicals into the brain and bloodstream. Modelling a situation, with your pals giggling under tables while you are pressed against the bosom of Maria Higgins, does not replicate the racing heart of a man fearing imminent death. Jamie moved closer to his computer screen, telling himself that he had been deceived by the bright Texan sun reflecting from the new glass build opposite. In a strangely old-fashioned action, he pinged his screen as if he was frightening a fly which had landed on the pages of a

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favourite book.

“I'll be damned.”

Nobody was listening. His colleagues were outside on the basketball court running up a thirst for the Friday evening bowling, beer and curry ritual.

Around the world, in the world's own good timing, a brutal reparation was taking place. The movement of the earth's core could be measured by the most sophisticated of instruments. A quiver here, a shiver there showed up as a carefully calibrated decimal, to the fifteenth decimal place. Experts would pore over the information with forensic intensity; everybody seeks answers to difficult questions. It is human nature. But none of that poring, none of that worrying like a dog at a bone answered the most pressing of questions. Was the planet imploding? Was the beautiful geometry of the planet at an end? Would the collapse of the fourth planet from the sun, the jewel in God's crown, signify the end of the human race?

Jamie consoled himself with the fact that he was a good helicopter ride from the drilling platforms. Only a nuke could take you out from hundreds of miles away. Jamie's training intervened, producing a brief interlude from his selfish thinking processes. There were procedures to be followed, drills to be enacted. Follow the rules to the letter. That's what the rules were there for. Jamie had witnessed an emergency on his computer screen. However, even emergency procedures are constructed on certain immutable facts and the crucial constant was that the seabed would always be there.

Out of sight, the seabed had collapsed. The ocean raged. Trillions of gallons of

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seawater crashed into the vastness of that fracture. Oil rigs shivered before tipping over like the iron men in children's picture books. Men and women, experienced riggers, were tossed aside like spent matchsticks. Oil gushed into a two hundred mile wound.

Nate threw himself from the rig and when his head crashed against the unbending sea he was knocked unconscious. He knew nothing of his final moments. As the door of his life was pulled shut, Nate and Mollie and Jamie and Kylie were lying beneath the chestnut tree at the top of the rise. The cold beer had never tasted better and Mollie was the most beautiful woman in the world. The world was a good place to be.

In an air-conditioned office in Houston, Jamie was on the phone to his fiance. He was speaking quickly. His voice shook. Mollie was frightened.

“What do you want me to do?”she asked.

“Get in the car and head for the hills.”

Mollie couldn't help herself.

“You make me sound like a bandit escaping the sheriff and his posse.”

“Listen to me. Something bad has happened.”

Jamie would never count himself amongst the wisest of men. No prophet was he in the chance reckoning of the future but when a fifty foot waves crashed into the BP headquarters in Houston, he wasn't in the least surprised.

He had been watching the guys on the basketball court and thought it strange that

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they were carrying on with their game when he remembered they were in a state of complete innocence. The mountain of waves swept them aside and his first thought was for Penny, a colleague, who was three months' pregnant. It was only last week that he made clear his feelings about her endangering her unborn child by such reckless activity and she had just laughed in his face.

Jamie heard the ache of metal, concrete and glass beneath his feet. He knew he wasn't long for this world. Would Mollie be safe in the surrounding hills or would she be there, in Heaven, to greet him? He had spent ten years feeling guilty about missing his father's funeral and was not looking forward to that particular reunion. His mum had relocated to Florida soon after. He had been against the move but she had never listened to him. He feared there would be an almighty crush at the gates of St Peter. It might be some time before they bumped into each other if bumping into each other was something you might do in the afterlife.

Out at sea in the great ensuing turmoil the mammals of the deep were turned upside down and inside out. They had enough to worry about without spending a second on the condition of mankind. Highways crumpled and homes were swatted aside, human endeavour and enterprise reduced to ridiculous rubble.

The trauma in the bowels of the earth was recorded and analysed. The patient was dying. Nobody accepted blame. Like children in a pickle, the heads of governments looked around to see who had done this thing. A litany of excuses were offered: we only sought the advancement of human knowledge; we were careful at every step along the way; our research was detailed and extensive; profit was never our sole

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guiding principle.

But excuses prevent nothing.

Katrina was born in Chiresoaia, a small village in Northern Romania. She was the fifth child, all girls, of a dirt-poor family and when she was ten she was sold for a small fortune to a sex gang who promised her an education and a thrilling life. At the age of thirteen she travelled in the cold, dark hold of a lorry for two days and nights to arrive in London where she was handed over to her sex masters. Thrilling indeed. Modern slavery is an invisible crime as long as you pretend to be stupid and/or naive. Anyone with eyes to see and a nose to smell knows, like a dog chasing a bone, exactly where to find it. There are many rich men, young and old, who have the senses of the Labrador and the morality of the devil. Such people will pay over the odds for a pretty young teenager especially one with no recourse to justice. Seven years later, on a snowy winter's night, which reminded Katrina of Romania, she slipped out of the back door of the sex salon, having filched a key from the stupidest and most drunken of their guards and stepped out into a dark alley. Katrina wasn't used to peace and quiet and, for a moment, she gazed up through the tunnel created by the tall buildings and spotted a full moon above her head. The moon was so beautiful, so remarkable, she half thought of remaining where she was but the wrenching open of a window above her head startled her into action. She hurried on her way, her handbag's long strap catching at her legs. She knew she only had one chance. There was no plan in her head just a pounding emotion driving her onwards.

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With every step her speed increased. Not for her the luxury of pausing at the pavement's edge. The poor driver didn't have a chance when she tripped over the trailing handbag and dived on to the road He was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Katrina was badly injured, losing a leg and suffering serious damage to the left side of her face. At twenty years of age, her superficial beauty was only a memory with which to rekindle her desperation and depression. There is always a market for kinky sex but a sexual partner without the will to live tends not to satisfy the paying customer. Katrina's weight ballooned and a barely controlled sullenness resulted in her being surplus to requirements.

She was sold to the one and only bidder on the dark internet, a Croydon librarian named Norman Leadbetter. In time Katrina and Norman grew stubbornly close ,learning to defy the distasteful comments from neighbours. The ensuing solitude turned out not to be a punishment, unexpectedly hardening into a protective shell , a warm cocoon of mutual dependency. Norman discovered the pleasures to be found in being kind and generous to another human being until one day Katrina realised that she was not being made to feel eternally grateful to her saviour. A seed of love can thrive in even the thinnest of soils. One evening Tchaikovsky on the CD player and a glass of red wine in their hands, Norman revealed that a life-changing vision had cemented his new-found optimism; the vision concerned a meeting on a mountain top with the Lord himself. The most surprising aspect of this vision recalled Norman was that the Lord was wearing the football colours of his beloved Chelsea.

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On 1st of August 2023 they left their flat in Croydon High Street to catch the underground tube tube train to Paddington Station where they would continue their journey to Heathrow. Katrina had a yearning to visit her parents and Norman was only too happy to oblige.

The tube doors had just swooshed shut when a powerful vibration shook the carriage. Norman took hold of Katrina's hand expecting the Lord himself to make an appearance. He felt not a scintilla of fear. He was comforted by the knowledge that, after all she had been through, Katrina was immune to fear. Life could throw nothing at her that she could not handle.

Other passengers were less restrained. Shouting, swearing, hammering on doors and windows achieved nothing. Norman and Katrina were an oasis of tranquillity, a still point amidst the anger, fear and self-pity engulfing every corner of the carriage. The whole ancient network of bricks, metal, concrete, plastic, pots and pans, television sets, dolls, Van Gogh masterpieces, clocks, a ministerial car, the Secretary of State for Health, fat dogs, Jim Masterson running from an assignation, roller skates, birthday cakes, opened bags of licorice allsorts, and an unused condom crashed into the centre of the earth.

Civilisation is a mongrel dog of achievement. You may build your house on rocks and still not be safe.

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It was no time to panic. Patricia Tonight passed into the living room and sat down on the untidy sofa. Thomas spotted crumbs at his feet and along the arm of the sofa. A splodge of tomato sauce had sunk like spilt blood into the fabric of a cushion, the very cushion he favoured. Not only did this position allow the best view of the television but also left room for the ghost of Ellen to keep him company whenever she so wished. Buddy's hair still clung to chairs, carpets and clothes.

“I don't want to die,” said Patricia Tonight.

“I'll make a cup of tea.”

“It was a lovely curry. Have you got anything stronger?”

“Of course.”

In the last three months Thomas had read all the relevant articles. It was not uncommon, explained The Times, for a period of shaking to be followed by a period of calm but knowledge was forever evolving and conjecture was the best that could be offered.

Thomas returned with two large whiskies.

“No point in good whisky going to waste. A dram of whisky dropping into a great hole is the very definition of waste to my mind”

“I've never married,” said Patricia Tonight, tears forming in the corners of her dark eyes. “I've got no kids. I'll be nothing more than a forgotten statistic.”

“You must have family living somewhere.”

Thomas' words were meant to console. He held no sentimental beliefs about the value of family. His twin sisters had little time for him especially now he was, in his own

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words, a miserable bastard.

“I have a brother. He lives in America But he doesn't keep in touch. He's very right wing in his politics. He sent a photograph of himself holding a massive gun. He's a real man and I'm no'. My mate tells me there's rivers of whisky in heaven. seems very confident. He never fastens his seat belt.”

Thomas watched his visitor's eyes settle on the photo of Ellen and Buddy. Thomas could see he was trying to work it out. The house was a dead house. He knew that to be the truth. There had been no laughter inside its walls in a long time.

“My wife and dog,” said Thomas.

“Where are they now?”

“Dead. They were killed in one of the first sinkings. An old tin mine caved in bringing down the whole kit and caboodle. I took that picture seconds before they died. I was closer than I am to you when my world ended.”

“That's a fucking awful story.”

“It is, isn't it? You hear that humming?”

“Yes. What is it?”

“The electricity going haywire. We're surrounded by electric wires making their way around the city. There'll be a smell of gas soon. The pipes fracture.”

“You sound as if you know what you're talking about.”

“Read everything I can get my hands on. Not that it helps. Knowing what's going to happen doesn't help you to avoid it.”

“That' s a lovely old clock,” Patricia Tonight said acknowledging the timepiece

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above the fireplace.

“Came from my old primary school. It shut down to be replaced by a new swanky build. The council sold off bits and pieces. Only cost a fiver.”

A silence settled upon them, two strangers brought together to bring in the end of the world, the whisky cradled in their laps replaying fond memories. the sort of thing that makes life worth living.

Thomas was first to smell the gas. Thomas remembered the last moments of his old life, the look of surprise on Ellen's face, the stupendous cracking beneath their feet and the falling, falling towards the centre where the fire always burns, Ellen's hands reaching up towards him and the dark and the mud and the sun catching the necklace at her throat and the uselessness of screaming, the uselessness of everything.

A tree fell somewhere in the park across the road. Thomas didn't find it hard, the waiting. He had been expecting it.

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