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Opening extract from **The Storm**

Written by
Virginia Bergin

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CHAPTER ONE

I was sinking.

That's how it is when you're all alone and there's been a global apocalypse and you're just hoping your dad is going to show up like he said he would but there's no sign of him so what exactly are you going to do if your dad doesn't come and every day you try hard not to think about that because . . .

Everything's going to be OK

is what you have to keep telling yourself but some part of you or maybe it's all of you thinks it isn't going to be OK so you try not to think at all but you can't stop thinking because pretty much everyone is dead and you've got nowhere to go and no one to go anywhere with and anyway who wants to go anywhere when THE SKY IS RAINING DEATH.

Yes, in an apocalypse-type situation it's very easy to think bad things. In fact, there's SO much time for thinking it's really easy to slide way beyond even regular apocalypse-type thinking into TOTAL COMPLETE AND

UTTER DOOM THINKING . . . because there's about a million days when you're stuck inside because it's raining killer rain or it looks like it's going to rain killer rain or you just can't face another day in the library.

Yup, that's how bad things got: I broke into Dartbridge Public Library. Swotting up on clouds (I know twenty-four different types!) didn't seem like it was going to be enough to get me through this thing. (Through it and into what? That was a whole other question, one best not asked.) My specialist areas of study were:

1. The self-help section. Oddly, there didn't seem to be that much on feeling a bit gloomy because human life on Earth as we know it has been wiped out – but you could tell people meant well. Ruby usefulness rating: 4/10.
2. Microbiology for people who quit biology at the end of Year 9, weren't really all that interested in science, and weren't any good at it anyway. It's baffling and creepy. Ruby rating: 1/10.
3. Car maintenance for people who would have dropped that too if they'd tried to teach it to us in school (which they should have done). I would not have chosen to study this, but something happened. I'll explain later. Ruby rating: 10/10.
4. Survival manuals. Frankly, I could have learned most of this stuff when I was in Girl Guides, but I tended to opt for the cake-making side of things (the benefits

seemed more obvious at the time). However, not even the SAS (the Special Air Service = very, very good-at-surviving-stuff British Army crack force), who have handy tips on surviving a nuclear bomb going off right next to you, seem to have been able to have imagined this particular kind of disaster. Or maybe they did, but when people saw the chapter on how the army would abandon anyone they had no use for and we'd all be left to fend for ourselves, they complained that it was an outrage and a lie and the SAS got made to take it out. (Even though it was TRUE.) Nevertheless, Ruby rating: 7/10 (because you never know).

5. Oh, and . . . one particularly sad and lonely day I had a quick look at mobile telecommunications. There are no phones and no internet anymore, so I was just curious, I suppose, about how difficult it'd be to build and run a thing like that. (Quite difficult, I think. Judging from the diagrams.) Ruby rating: 0/10.

My mobile phone is at the top of a list of all the things there'll be no more of (currently 402 items long with the recent shock addition of chocolate spread; I was scooping the last fingerful out from under the rim of a jar when I realised supplies *will* eventually run out).

There are no people on this list. Their names, the names of the dead, are written on my heart. My small, sad, human heart. Hurt so bad it will never cry again.

Don't get me wrong. I cry. I cry plenty. I howl! But

my heart? It is all cried out. It is silent.

I don't do pets any more either. Apart from the risk that a single sloppy lick from a puddle-drinker could kill you, they're nothing but heartbreak and trouble . . . and they're ganging up. Probably there are small, mean teams of guinea pigs and rabbits, but the dogs are certainly hanging out together – I've seen packs of them roaming – and I've even seen *loose affiliations** of cats. Not Ruby, though – that's Mrs Wallis's Siamese; she doesn't affiliate herself with anyone. She's still hanging around in a strictly unaffiliated sort of way and she seems to be doing OK, though I sincerely hope her well-fed appearance has got nothing to do with the disappearance of Mrs Wallis's shih-tzu Mimi (last seen absconding from a car in the school car park and running in the direction of home), or indeed with the disappearance of Mrs Wallis herself.

There is a shorter list of things I'm glad there'll be no more of, currently twelve items long. Exams come top, which I never would – 'come top', geddit? – so that's why they are

* A very useful term: here's how I learned it:

TEACHER: So, although Molly Stevens is your friend, you're saying you don't know why she's not in PE?

ME: Well . . .

TEACHER: Just try to answer the question, Ruby.

ME: I wouldn't exactly say we're *friends* friends . . .

TEACHER: So . . . (*sighs*) despite the fact that I see you in each other's company every single day, you're claiming you're not . . . (*sighs again; does little quote-mark wiggles with exasperated fingertips*) 'friends' friends, you're saying you're just *loosely affiliated*?

ME: (*Pause*) That would be correct?

numero uno. This list is a lot harder to think of stuff for, so it's brilliant when I do come up with something. The last time I thought of something – 'No one can stop me from drinking whatever I like whenever I like!' – I drank to celebrate. I hit my mum's gin.

I remember standing, swaying, at the open front door, watching the rain pour down. I think I was talking to it. I wouldn't have been saying nice things.

When I woke up the next morning, alive, I crossed the drink thing off the list.

The thing about going a bit mental is it's hard to realise that's what's happening.

I stopped going to the library. (What do the SAS know? They're buffoons!) I stopped doing anything much, other than things I absolutely had to do – and even my grip on those got a bit shaky. I'd get up and think, *I must clean my teeth* . . . and it'd be bedtime before I got around to it – although bedtime itself got a bit flexible. Sometimes it happened in the middle of the day; sometimes it happened all day. And sometimes, when it was supposed to be bedtime, because it was the middle of the night, it didn't happen at all.

One such night, I shaved my hair off. All of it. It seemed easier to do that than wash it. Easier, even, than trying to find a can of dry shampoo with anything left in it – when in any case, just like chocolate spread, supplies *will* run out eventually, so why not face facts? That's

what I imagine I was thinking . . . when really I don't remember thinking anything much, just picking up my (looted) battery-powered lady-shave . . . and watching grubby clump-lettes of (dyed) black hair fall.

It should have been the head-shaving that alerted me to how serious my situation was. Bit of a clue there. But all I ended up doing was adding the result to one of my other lists: the list of stupid things I've done.

That one's not written down either, it's just burned on my brain. It hurts.

My shaved head looked like a small fuzzy globe, a planet . . . inside which strange things happened. Below the spiky surface, dark, wordless thoughts massed, rose and sunk. Popped up again, doing the back-stroke. Giggling. Or hid deep in the goo of my mind, screaming messages that bubbled up garbled.

All day, every day, all night, every night, my head simmered with nonsense. Sometimes it boiled. Until finally there didn't seem to be anything very much left inside my head at all. Boiled dry, I guess. I don't think the thoughts had words any more. First off even the sensible, normal ones got texty: 'I must clean my teeth' became 'clean teeth'. Then it was just 'teeth'. Then, when the words had pretty much stopped altogether, it was probably just 'W'.

I was lost on Planet Ruby, where weeks and days and

hours and minutes and seconds (there were some very long seconds) got muddled – and dream and reality got muddled too. And nightmares, but they were pretty much only about as awful as what was real.

And it might have all gone on and on like that until I really did walk out in the rain (then it would stop), but finally SOMETHING HAPPENED TO ALERT ME TO HOW SERIOUS MY SITUATION WAS . . .

I crashed a Ferrari. Totalled it.

I was flooring it, coming round a bend (up on Dartmoor, I was about to realise), when I hit a patch of mist, part of which turned out not to be mist, but a sheep, so I swerved and –

SCREECH!

KA-BLAM!

BOUFF!

The airbag thing smashed into my face. Only somehow my own hands had got involved.

OK, I know how. I like to do this fancy cross-hands thing when I'm turning corners. So, yeah, my own arms got biffed into my face by the airbag.

I sat there. Punched face screaming. Dazed – double dazed, because you want to know a terrible thing? I

wasn't even sure about how I'd got there. I mean I must have thought I should get out of the house for a bit – to go on an I-need-something-to-drink mission, most probably. (Supplies always seemed to be running low, but that was probably because time was running weird: one minute I'd have plenty of cola or whatever, and the next minute I'd be draining dregs and panicking.) But since I often thought I should do something and didn't do it, or thought something had happened when it hadn't actually happened, I was seriously shocked to realise that this crash thing, apparently, *had* really happened. Though I only knew it for sure because IT HURT. OWWW. ARRRGH. OWWWWW.

WAKE UP, RUBY! WAKE UP!

The car was a mash-up; I didn't even have to try to start it again – which I did – to know that. It had snogged a wall. They didn't like each other. Not one bit.

I got out of the car. My eyes were already stinging like something nasty had been flung into them. I put my hand up to my boffed nose and felt blood. I looked at the blood on my fingertips; then I squinted at the thing that would like to eat that blood.

Mist's a funny old thing, isn't it? Basically, it's just a cloud that's hit rock-bottom. A cloud (*stratus nebulosus*, doncha know) that can no longer be bothered to get up into the sky. It drags its sorry self along the ground.

Funny? It's hilarious, really: is it going to kill you, or isn't it? How much of it – *exactly* – would have to settle on your skin before . . .

I could see that mist swirling and swelling towards me. I should have got back into the car and waited it out . . . but I've got a bit of an *emotional issue* about being trapped in a car – particularly, in this case, one that had just SMASHED into a wall; probably anyone left alive in Devon would have heard that crash. Some scary someone-anyone could be on their way to investigate. So – add this to the list of stupid things! – I didn't wait. I ran.

All I could think was . . . *it* was coming after me. *But I could outrun it.*

I bolted across the moor. I scrambled up – up – up. Up rocks. Up-up-up. Up-up-up. Stupid-stupid-stupid Ruby. Up-up-up.

Until there was no more up.

I knew I was at the top of Hay Tor not because I'm, like, really keen on long, rambling walks in scenic landscapes, but because there was no place higher to go; anyone who lives in Dartbridge knows this place, because you can see it for miles around – when it's clear.

I stood on the rocks from where there was no place up – **no** place: no other or further or higher place – watching the mist rise around me, puffing itself up like it was just remembering it could be a cloud that could get on up into that sky and rain.

I wiped at my throbbing nose, saw blood on the back

of my hand. What if it could *smell* it? What if all those little wiggly-legged bacterium ET micro-blobs could smell my blood? What if they were all now paddling away like mad, waving their little tentacles, letting out little micro-squeals of joy at the scent of breakfast?

I didn't know how that would be, having that *thing*, that disgusting little blood-gobbling, world-murdering *thing* get me slowly.

Bad? Very bad? Unimaginably excruciatingly bad?

And lonely.

I was going to die alone on Hay Tor. My body would be pecked at by crows; nibbled on by sheep bored of grass. Foxes would come and have a good old chew on my bones – maybe drag a few back to the den for the cubs. Someone someday would put my rain-eaten, worm-licked, weather-worn skull on top of the highest stone, and Hay Tor would get a whole new name: Stupid Dead Girl Hill.

I stood. I roared.

No; that's just what I'd like to say I did.

I lost it.

I stood and I whimpered and in the mist in front of me through stinging, weeping eyes I saw the shadow of a someone-anyone. Fear crackled through me.

No one moved.

And they'd die if they stayed there, swallowed by the mist – and I felt my arms waving and I heard my own wrecked voice shouting, 'COME ON!'

And the shadow-being waved back. She waved back.

And I saw she was me, and wasn't real at all.

And I sat down on the rocks, weeping.

And the shadow girl sat too . . . and melted. She went away. Almost as quickly as she had appeared, she disappeared.

I knew what she was. I'd seen her in the cloud book. A rare thing – called a 'Brocken spectre', when you see your own shadow in a cloud. Enough to spook anyone out. More than enough to spook me.

The mist went with her – the shadow-ghost of me – burning off in the sun, until I was just a stupid girl with a punched face, sitting alone on Hay Tor.

Wake up, Ruby Morris.