Opening Extract from...

The Last of Us

Written by Rob Ewing

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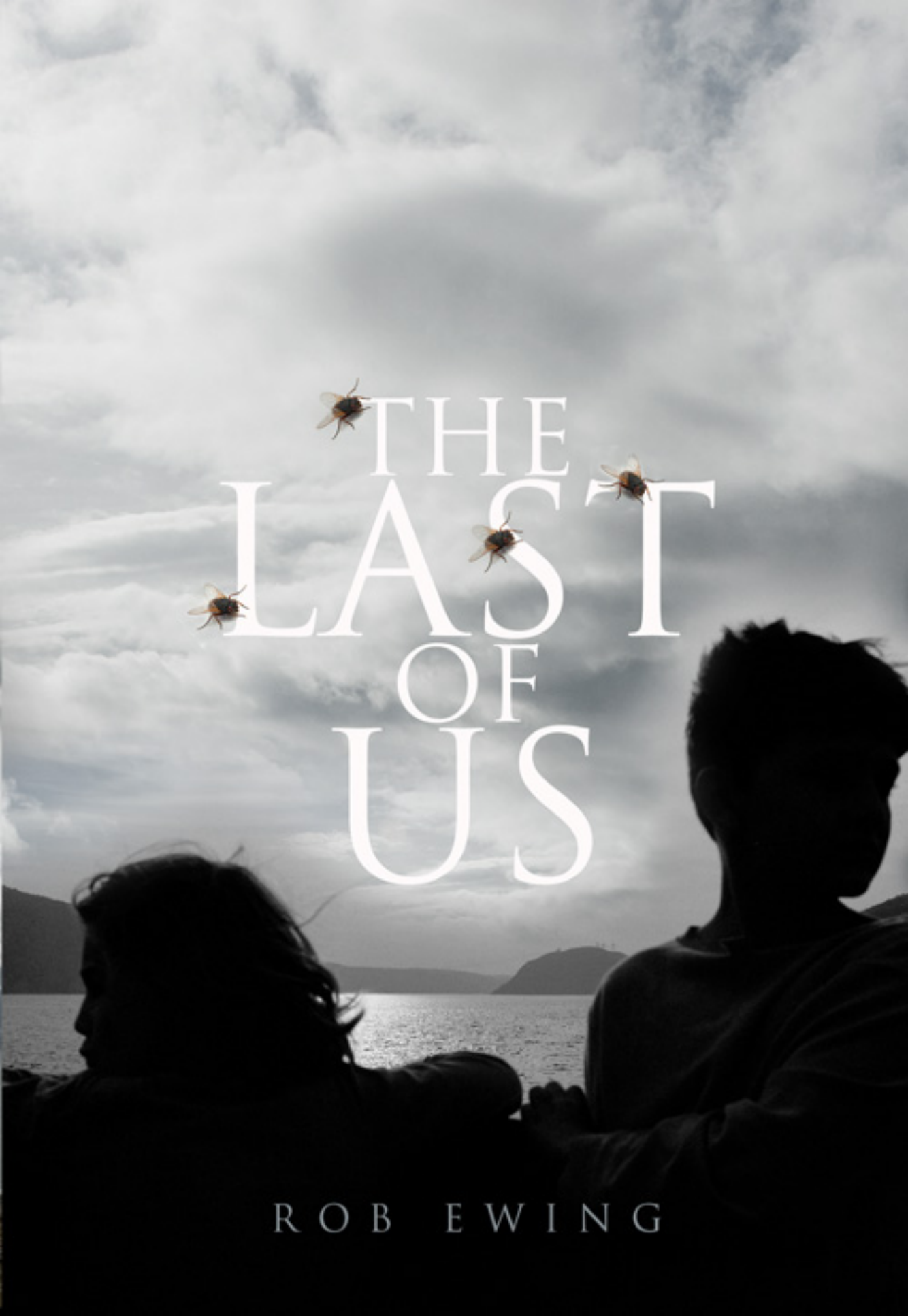
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Behind the Back Bay

Date – lost count

I have become skilled.

For starters let's talk about dogs. When dogs die after being trapped inside you usually find them at the front or back door, or near the toilet if it hasn't gone dry, or next to the water melted out of a freezer. I imagine them running between the two choices: water and escape, water and escape, until it's too late.

Cats are usually by these too, or by the window if there isn't a cat flap. But you can't predict as well with cats, maybe because they had too much of their own mind back when they were still alive.

Being an explorer you get skilled at knowing.

I know what a cup of tea left for months looks like: dried muck. Bowls of fruit turn to furry glue. Cupboards jump with mice when you open them. Plants all die, apart from that one cactus we found, because trapped indoors was a good enough desert for it.

And dogs are more often found at doors, cats at windows. That's the rule. Plus dogs smell worse than cats, though neither of them are very nice.

I say I've become skilled – but the truth is everything has got more difficult. So I can't wait here for ever for my friends to come back. Can't keep imagining new friends out of thin air. Can't keep hiding in the same old sleeping bag without noticing the bad stink of it.

Even with skill you can't truly smell yourself. If you came home Mum, magicking yourself out of the wind in the bay, this is what I think you would smell:

1. *Old food*
2. *Dog-smell from the dog-friend (gone now)*
3. *The smell from my glass-cuts*
4. *Clothes & bedsheets*
5. *Pee smell (Alex's bed before his illness)*
6. *Smoke (from the bad fire)*
7. *Shoes (seawater + shoes = epic fail)*
8. *Cheesy crisps (strange, we didn't have any of them)*
9. *Cold wet air*
10. *Earwax*

Still, there's the worry about smells you can't know, and there's no way to come wise on that. So this morning I went outside. I went holding onto doors, chairs, cardboard boxes. Rubbish piles. And I collected the yellow bits of gorse from the field at the end of the street, and brought them in and put them in saucers all around.

Now they shine like fires far away, like when the crofters set fire to the heather and you saw it at dusk.

My eyes go slow around the room. It's half-bright from the skylight, even though we taped cereal boxes over the glass to keep out the sun. Here in the high north, now that it's summer, our sun hardly goes away. Underneath the skylight is Elizabeth's bed: still made, with the edges neat the way she liked. Her rules on the wall, her survival books in a tower. Alex's drawings and toys scattered like he always kept them, like he got grabbed in the middle of one last fight. Which I suppose he did.

I can see the stain on the carpet. Red food dye. That mark tells where it started to go bad for us.

Then the clothes that Elizabeth got out but didn't have enough room to take. Her toys, which made me uneasy, because she was meant to be the one in charge. So uneasy that I wrapped them away from seeing.

If anyone is listening: God, or Mum, or the devil: I should say that the only obstacle from taking the bad tablet is me. That's not a pretty thought, right? Except I was too busy with other plans for escape to notice when the thought came. When it sneaked inside me.

You see, I did one bad thing. But that bad thing led to lots of others, which grew like a crowd of dogs when you're holding warm food.

Now it hurts too much to think about. So I'll think about this, instead: how Alex used to ask, 'How many more sleeps?' How some mornings he'd wake up convinced he didn't sleep at all. How he was sure he just went to bed and woke up and it was light. Nothing in-between.

How you used to give imaginary directions to someone driving a car over the sea to our island.

Turn southeast at Greenland. Down a bit from Iceland, up from Ireland, up and across a bit from England or Wales. Our island is one of the Western Isles – not the Outer Hebrides, which is the wrong-sounding word that mainlanders use. (Nobody knows what Hebrides means – not even our teacher, Mrs Leonard, who's dead now, though you can still see her if you want to.)

Know what *that* means, Mum?

'Course you do – you are up there with God, and can see it all. Only I dare you – dare you to come down into the village, then go past the lifeguards' station, and on to the houses that look like someone coloured them in with white chalks.

Go ask her yourself. Go on.

Mum, if it's you that's listening – even though you never give me any sign these days – then I have to tell you one more thing. Don't take it the wrong way, but – your last look was a look that meant nothing.

I don't mean that there was nothing there at all. Being skilled these days I know what a real true empty face shows – there's usually too much teeth, plus no eyes you can figure on. And I don't mean it didn't mean anything to me – because it did, else I wouldn't be forever harking back and going from one detail – *creased mouth* – to the next – *half-wide eyes* – to the next – *eye-wrinkles not happy or sad* – and thinking: but what does it add up to?

No, the problem about your last look was – I'm still not big

enough to read it. That's the law of faces: you can read kids younger, but older kids get hard. Adults, even harder still. If you get words as well, that can help – except when the look is sarcasm, which doesn't go true and has no law.

But you didn't give me any words – just a look, which might be somewhere between surprise, or all-time giving in, or not caring, or caring too much.

So I'm trying to work it out. Hopefully I get there before the time I've got runs out.

And now that I've told you that one thing – now that we're back on talking terms – I need to ask a favour.

If you are in heaven, and seeing everything – like the crumbs at the bottom of my sleeping bag, like the gorse spread around the room or the sea's sparkle in the window – then you need to blur your eyes for once. Stop paying attention to stuff that doesn't matter.

Instead: help my friends.

Three weeks ago

This morning I noticed Elizabeth's rainbow. She put water in a saucer on the windowsill, then a mirror in the water. I didn't think it'd work, but then saw that it did.

It's on the wall, beside the cereal boxes we taped over the big skylight. It wobbles a bit like the sea, disappears with the wind, comes back when the air is still. Just now it reminds me of a puddle with petrol spilt on it.

Elizabeth is still in bed. She's looking towards me with her eyes open. I give her a wave but she looks like right through, like she's thinking about the way things were before, which she usually is.

I hear a yowling noise from out on the street: one of the cats, or their kittens. They still roam around, for all days mainly, only now the bigger group is broken up into just a few stragglers who feed on rubbish like the gulls.

Saw two of the kittens taken by an eagle. The MacNeil brothers saw the rest go. Saw a crumple of fur and bones on

the shore-walk next to the sculpture of the seal. The cats stayed in their house for a while after that, but I guess they got their courage working again.

Elizabeth gets up and begins to ribbon my hair without saying anything. Alex sits forward, rubs sleep from his eyes. His trousers are damp. Elizabeth gets him to stand and strips his sheets, tumbling them into a ball to be put in the garden.

Alex washes himself with a flannel then says, 'You get up?' His voice is dry and croaky; Elizabeth recognises the warning signs so plonks a bowl of cereal in his lap and orders him to eat. She pours ten toty cartons of cream in a glass, adds yellow sterilised water, pours the lot on top and hey presto – he's got a normal breakfast.

Our clothes are already in three piles. Elizabeth puts on a CD – *Winnie the Pooh*, which we listen to while getting dressed. Then she takes the balled-up sheets and puts them in the garden beside all the others.

Alex: 'It's only sweat. I just sweat the bed.'

Me: 'Don't worry about it.'

Alex: 'I just have a weakness for sweating . . .'

Me: 'OK, I believe you.'

He's scared of going to the toilet alone, so I take his hand and go with. The flies on the ceiling do their mad angry dance when the door opens and closes. The porch door's stiff, not broken like the one to the kitchen.

Outside, there's the smell of dewy grass and moss in the sun. I jump over the screeching fence, do my daily business. Alex is about to go by the door when I warn him to come

away a good bit: 'Stop being too close,' I hiss. 'You're always too close. Come over by the fence.'

He comes in by the fence, pees. He looks around – to the street, to the bay, to the road going west and to Beinn Tangabhal, our big hill at the far end of town.

Alex: 'Is it smoke?'

He's pointing at the hill. It's only cloud. I tell him.

'Cloud isn't smoke then?'

I think about it, then decide I don't know the answer. I'm pretty sure I used to know the answer. Or maybe he's half asleep, and it's a kid's question.

He's less bleary when we get back in. By now Elizabeth is doing her routine. She turns the two radios on. One has a dial which she circles all the way, going through the stations. The other has buttons. She takes her time, slowing on the dial at the places we marked with gold stars. Then she gives Alex his injection. He already has his jumper up ready, so it's done quick.

She holds up his pen and looks in carefully at the glass window on the inside of it.

'Just half of this one left,' she says.

After this Elizabeth writes our shopping list: *Sheets – for 1 week. Breakfast. Batteries. Bags. Tins.* Hearing a noise, she turns down the CD. We all listen. But it's only coming from the street, a lot of yowling and screeching – it's from the House of Cats. She turns the CD up again.

We've finished the funny milk that doesn't need a fridge, so I have cartons too, and they're not bad. There's apricot jam after this. We dip pink wafer biscuits in, rather than using our spoons and having to wash up. Then there's digestive

biscuits, toasted over the gas-burner flame, then hint-of-mint hot chocolate.

I comb Alex's hair. He doesn't like wiping his face, plus he always forgets to wash his hair, so I take him to the mirror to show him how it looks and the damage it does to his appearance.

I get the toothbrushes out, brush mine. 'Dreamt I had a wobbly tooth last night,' I say, remembering.

Elizabeth is cleaning our cups in the bowl. 'You missing any new ones? Or old ones, mean to say?'

I put a finger in to test: 'All just the same.'

'Why do we brush our teeth again? Can anybody remember?'

'Oh *not* this again . . .'

Alex wrinkles his face at our talk of teeth. He doesn't like having his brushed. He had a sore tooth when it was still dark and stormy, and his face went big for a week. After that he lost four of his baby teeth, all at once. He cried a lot, and it took him ages to get better. Now he has a big gap in his top teeth, with no adult ones in yet.

Me: 'Remember all the good reasons?'

Alex: 'Elizabeth says gum disease means sickness going in the blood. Plus, if you swallow a tooth then you don't get a coin.' He sighs and looks around for his clothes, which I know is just a delaying tactic.

I push down his chin, which doesn't usually work but does today.

Me: 'Firstly: chewing surfaces.'

The saying of this makes us stop. We both look at each other. Then we ignore ourselves.

* * *

It's only a short walk to school. The skinny cats follow us, so we scare them off. It rained last night, but it's sunny now, which makes the road shine.

If I almost close my eyes this brightness joins up with the shine coming from the sea. When I tell Elizabeth about this, that it's one way of making everything look back to normal, she nods and does her distant look.

We sit down in our usual classroom seats and unpack our bags. Alex is very fussy about how he sets out his pens: he has to get the colours right before it's good. Elizabeth sits beside Alex, then we wait for the MacNeil brothers.

I wait until the clock shows 9:02 before starting. We do reading first – this is Alex alone. Elizabeth leaves it to me, so I give him plenty of praise and tell him he's a Good Communicator. I put a star in his reading book, then get him to read it again in his head. Then we do writing – I draw two lines in Alex's book, ask him to do his best vowels. After this we do words, then sentences.

While he's doing a story I take myself aside. In my head I think: All right Rona. Read this page to this page. Then do a story where you use plenty of Wow Words, and especially these – Frog, Dainty, Wolf, Tiredly.

Elizabeth is about to start her lesson when Calum Ian comes in, with Duncan following after him.

Duncan is wearing his hood up high today, the way he does when he wants to be invisible.

They take a seat as far from us as possible. Calum Ian takes out his pencil and sharpener. He starts to sharpen his pencil onto the floor in one long unsnapped strand.

'Martin far,' says Elizabeth.

I know she can't help it, but she never gets it right. She says *madainn mhath* like there's a Martin who's far. The first time she said it I nearly went – 'All right, where?' I've tried to correct her, but there's no chance she'll come wise.

'*Pòg mo thòin*,' Calum Ian replies.

This is very rude and should never be said, not even to your worst enemy.

Elizabeth: 'I know what *Poke Ma Hone* means.' She gets the sound of *that* right at least.

Calum Ian looks like he knew she knew already.

'What is it, Duncan?' Elizabeth asks. 'Why are you hiding yourself away?'

Duncan's jacket scrunches.

Calum Ian: 'He's being quiet. He only wants to sit in peace and quiet. That's right isn't it, Duncan?'

Duncan doesn't answer.

Elizabeth takes the teacher's seat. There are ten empty places, five filled. She writes our names in the register, then hands around bits of paper.

'We'll start with an activity,' she says. 'As part of our remembering. It's the thing where you choose a colour, then a number. All right? Then there's a message. We can all make one. Who wants to have a go?'

She calls it a fortune-teller for our fingers. It's like a beak with four spikes, made of paper. My first try ends up wrong. Alex can't do his and he ends up getting offended. Calum Ian does his but looks grumpy about it, while Duncan's hands are quick and skilled.

Me: 'Choose a colour.'

Alex: 'Blue.'

Me: 'B – L – U – E. Choose a number.'

Alex: 'Four.'

Me: 'One two, three four. Open this up. And the message is – Keep calm and keep playing.'

In the end it's a good enough project. We laugh at some of the ruder messages, then Alex finds one which says You see a ship! And we stop wanting to play.

We have a break, then Elizabeth says we should change activity: to real remembering.

'Who wants to go first?'

When nobody volunteers she begins:

'Dad used to talk about memory. He said there was short-term, and there was long-term. Can anyone tell me what the difference is?'

Nobody wants to say and get it wrong.

'All right, so short-term's the thought you just had. It doesn't last, unless you remember it again. Long-term lasts, but sometimes you need to remember it to keep it strong. Otherwise it can fade, and you forget.'

She waits for us to understand. I try to remember what I had for dinner – no, it's gone. I should've practised.

Elizabeth: 'Who'll go first?'

No one answers. Calum Ian looks up at the cracks on the ceiling, then stretches out his arms and collects back like he's years after being bored.

'Will you try, Duncan?'

Duncan pretends to be reading his jotter. But then, to

surprise us all, he stands. He stands for the longest time, even past the point of my being nervous for him.

'Dad used to have a game where he pretended he was a robot,' he says in a hurry. 'You'd control him, except he might attack.'

He waits for us to say anything. When nobody does he goes on: 'I remember he was friendly after the pub. If he'd gotten drunk he had a joke about people annoying him to give him a trophy. He didn't want it. They'd run up the street after him, chasing him. It was sort of stupid . . .'

He looks out at us, seeing if we're still listening, looking like he's sure we'll be bored.

'I thought he was trying to make himself out to be important . . . I thought he was worried about being too ordinary as a dad. That's why I always practise my fiddle: so he can see how good I am when he comes back. So I can make him proud.'

He stops. Elizabeth makes a go-on face. We're meant to be writing it all down for Duncan to keep in his diary, but I mostly prefer just to be listening.

'Mam, she played I spy. She said it in the Gaelic. Said it with sounds, as well: I hear with my little ear. You could hear the kettle, or the wind. Or the fridge. Once she did it for her stomach rumbling. Then for her baby.' He stops for a while, picks at some fluff on the edge of his sleeve. I can see all his face now. There's new scabs on his chin.

'Dad didn't play the robot game when everything went bad. There wasn't much I spy then either.'

After a long time and with a quiet voice he asks: 'If a baby isn't born, does it still get up to heaven?'

Calum Ian stops writing. He leans across and raps Duncan hard on the arm.

'That's you finished. You've done your bit. I don't want you talking about them, all right? So, you're done, *suidh sìos*. Now get your arse in and sit.'

Duncan wants to stay standing – but when Calum Ian gets up and folds his arms, he sits. His big brother looks annoyed, or maybe sad, I can't tell. He gives Elizabeth a look like she did a stupid thing for encouraging Duncan.

'Know what I think?' he says. 'There's just as much stuff we need to forget. So get on, Big Brains, answer that: how do we *stop* ourselves from remembering?'

We wait on Elizabeth.

'Remembering is all we've got,' she says.

It feels like the right time to change topic. Elizabeth writes down Duncan's memories then gives them to him.

'Let's move on to sums,' she tells us.

It's my job to hand out the workbooks. We all know the pages, but I say them anyway because that's what happens in a class. My lesson is counting money. I have to count picture-bundles of spending money in under a minute. I use the clock on the wall. It takes me two minutes, but only forty seconds if I cheat.

Alex, who's young, has to read *Kipper's Birthday*, which he's done before but this time with feeling. Duncan's the same age as me, yet he won't be encouraged. He mostly lies head-down until it's time to go. Calum Ian is one year below Elizabeth, so he copies her mostly.

I turn the pages and stare at the sums I know I did last

year. The book is very good – giving examples, sums that are worked through, but even so, it's not enough. I don't want to tell the boys that I don't know. The last time I did that they called me *Gloic,* which means brainless idiot, not even anything to do with the truth.

Then the sun starts to shine on my desk, and now I want to be outside. I think of the gardens we saw on the way here, with flowers I haven't the name for, either in the Gaelic or English. I recognised some very big daisies, but the rest I didn't know. Daffodils? Roses, maybe? There might be a book in one of the houses, or the library. For learning there can't be a better place to start than there.

'This is dumb,' Calum Ian says.

I look up at Elizabeth, who pretends not to hear, at least not until he says it for a second time.

'Why is it dumb?'

Calum Ian scratches his pen across the lid of his desk. 'It's the same page, over and over. Plus I never cared about sums in the before. How can they help us now?'

Elizabeth lines up her jotter and pencils. Then says, 'Sums are needed for lots of things.'

'Say some.'

She tries to think of examples. In the long run she says, 'Sums can tell you what the date is.'

'No they don't. All you need for that is a calendar. And there's plenty of those in the post office.'

Me: 'People used to tell the time by the sun. True. There was a shortest day and a longest. The olden-times people used sums to work it out.'