WE OWN THE SKY

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For Markéta, Tommy, and Danny

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Part I

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1

She read up a storm before she left. In her favourite hard-backed chair; in bed, propped up on a mound of pillows. The books spilled over from the bedside table, piling up on the floor. She preferred foreign detective novels and she ploughed through them, her lips chastely pursed, her face rigid, unmoving.

Sometimes I would wake in the night and see the lamp was still on: Anna, a harsh silhouette, sat with a straight back, just how she was always taught. She did not acknowledge that I had woken, even though I turned towards her, but stared down into her book, flicking through the pages as if she was cramming for a test.

At first it was just the usual suspects from Scandinavia – Henning Mankell, Stieg Larsson – but then she moved on: German noir from the 1940s, a Thai series set in 1960s Phuket. The covers were familiar at first – recognisable fonts and designs from major publishers – but soon they became more esoteric, with foreign typesetting and different bindings.

And then, one day, she was gone. I don't know where those books are now. I have looked for them since, to see if a few of them have snuck onto my shelves, but I have never found any. I imagine she took them all with her, packed them up in one of her colour-coded bin bags.

The days after she left are a haze. A memory of anaesthetic. Drawn curtains and neat vodka. An unsettling quietness, like the birds going silent before an eclipse. I remember sitting in the

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lounge and staring at a crystal tumbler and wondering whether fingers of vodka were horizontal or vertical.

There was a draft that blew through the house. Under the doors, through the cracks in the walls. I think I knew where it was coming from. But I couldn't go there. I couldn't go upstairs. Because it wasn't our house any more. Those rooms did not exist, as if adults with secrets had declared them out of bounds. So I just sat downstairs, in that old, dead house, the wind chilling my neck. They had gone and the silence bled into everything.

Oh, I'm sure she'd love to see me now, tucked into this gloomy alcove in a grubby little pub – just me, a flickering TV, some guy pretending to be deaf selling Disney key rings that glow in the dark. The front door of the pub has a hole in it, as if someone has tried to kick it down, and through the flapping clear plastic I can see some kids hanging around in the car park, smoking and doing tricks on an old BMX.

'I told you so.' She wouldn't say it out loud – she had too much class for that – but it would be there on her face, the almost imperceptible raising of an eyebrow, the foreshadowing of a smile.

Anna always thought I was a bit rough, could never quite shake off the council estate. I remember when I told her my dad used to spend his Saturday afternoons in the betting shop. Polite bemusement, that smug little smile. Because no one in her family even went to pubs. Not even at Christmas, I asked once? No, she said. They might have a glass of sherry after lunch, but that would be it, nothing more. They went bell ringing instead.

It is dark now and I cannot remember the sun going in. A car revs outside and headlights sweep around the pub like a prison searchlight. I go back to the bar and order another pint. Heads

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turn towards me but I don't make eye contact, avoiding the stares, the inscrutable nods.

A burly fisherman is perched on a stool, facing towards the door. He is telling a racist joke about a woman having an affair and the plucking of a lone pube and I remember hearing it once after school, in an east London alleyway where people dumped porn mags and empty cans of Coke. The regulars laugh at the punch line, but the barmaid is silent, turns away from them. On the wall behind her, there are Page 3 pin-ups and framed newspapers from the day after 9/11.

'Four pound ten, darling,' the barmaid says, putting the beer down. My hands are shaking and I fumble around in my wallet, spilling my change out onto the bar.

'Sorry,' I say, 'cold hands.'

'I know,' she says, 'it's freezing out. Here, let me.' She picks up the coins and then, as if I am a frail pensioner, counts out the rest of the money from my open hand.

'There you go,' she says. 'Four pound ten.'

'Thank you,' I say, a little ashamed, and she smiles. She has a kind face, the type you don't often see in places like this.

As she bends down to unpack the dishwasher, I take a long swig of vodka from my hip flask. It is easier than ordering a short with every pint. It marks you as a drinker and they keep their eyes on you then.

I go back to my table and I notice a young woman sitting at the far end of the bar. Before, she was sitting with one of the men, one of the fisherman's friends, but now he has gone, screeched away in a souped-up hatchback. She looks like she is dressed for a night out, in a short skirt, a skimpy, glittery top, her eyelashes spiky and dark.

I watch the barmaid, checking I cannot be seen, and then take another swig of vodka and I can feel that familiar buzz,

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that sad, little bliss. I look at the woman sitting at the bar. She is doing shots now, shouting at the barmaid, who I think is her friend. As she laughs, she nearly topples off her stool, only just catching her balance, her breath.

I will go over to her soon. Just a couple more drinks.

I flick through Facebook, squinting my eyes so I can see the screen. My profile is barren, without pictures, just a silhouette of a man, and I never 'liked' or commented or wished anyone happy birthday but I was there every day, scrolling, judging, scrolling, judging, dank little windows into the lives of people I no longer knew, with all their sunrises and sunsets, their cycle trips through the Highlands, the endless stream of Instagrammed Pad Thai and avocado toast, the unfathomable smugness of their sushi dinners.

I take a deep breath, then a swig each of beer and vodka. I pity them. All those tragedy whores, with their Tricolours and rainbows, changing their profile pics to whatever we are supposed to care about today – the refugees, the latest victims of a terror attack in some godforsaken place. All their hashtags and heartfelt posts about 'giving' because they once helped build a school in Africa on their gap year and kissed a beggar's brown hand with their pearly white mouth.

I change my position at the table so I can see the girl at the bar. She has ordered another drink and is laughing, almost cackling, as she watches a video on her phone, pointing at it, trying to get the barmaid's attention.

I go back to my phone. Sometimes I force myself to look at the photos of other people's children. It is, I suppose, like the urge to pick at a newly formed scab, not letting up until there is a metallic blush of blood. The stomach-punches of new arrivals, gap-toothed kids starting school, with their satchels and oversized

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blazers; and then their beach holidays, with their sandcastles and moats and ice creams dropped in the sand. Big shoes and little shoes, lined up on the mat.

And then the mothers. Oh those Facebook mothers. The way they talked, as if they had invented motherhood, as if they had invented the womb, telling themselves they were different from their own mothers because they ate quinoa and had cornrows in their hair and ran a Pinterest board on craft ideas for the recalcitrant under-fives.

I walk back to the bar and stand close to the drunk woman. With enough drink inside me, I feel better and my hands have stopped shaking. I smile and she stares back, wobbling on her stool, looking me up and down.

'Would you like a drink?' I say, cheerfully, as if we already know each other.

In her glazed eyes, there is a flicker of surprise. She forces herself to sit up straight, so she is no longer slumped over the bar.

'Rum and coke,' she says, her swagger returning, and she turns away from me, tapping her fingers on the bar.

As I am ordering the drinks, she pretends to be doing something on her phone. I can see her screen and she is just randomly flicking between applications and messages.

'It's Rob, by the way,' I say.

'Charlie,' she says. 'But everyone calls me Charls.'

'You're local?' I ask.

'Camborne, born and bred,' she says, swivelling her body to face me. 'But I'm staying with my sister up here now.' Her eyes are like lizard tongues, darting towards me when she thinks I'm not looking.

'You've probably never heard of Camborne, have you?'

'Mining, right?'

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'Yeah. Not any more though. My dad worked at South Crofty, till it were closed,' she says and I notice how Cornish she sounds. The fading inflection, the soft rolled Rs.

'And you?'

'London.'

'London. Very nice.'

'Do you know London?'

'Been there once or twice,' she says, looking away again to the other end of the bar, taking a deep drag of her cigarette.

She is younger than I thought, mid-twenties, with red-brown hair and soft, childish features. There is something vaguely unhinged about her, something I can't place, that goes beyond the drink, beyond the smudges around her eyes. She seems out of place in The Smugglers, as if she has ducked out of a wedding party and ended up here.

'Down here on your holidays, then?'

'Something like that.'

'So you like Tintagel, then?' she asks.

'I only arrived today. I'll go to the castle tomorrow. I'm staying in the hotel next door.'

'First time here, then?'

'Yes.'

It is a lie, but I cannot tell her about the time we were here before. The three of us, the end of a wet British summer, wrapped up against the wind, raincoats over shorts. I remember how Jack charged around on the grass next to the car park and how fearful Anna was – 'hold hands, Jack, hold hands' – in case he got too close to the edge. I remember how we walked up the steep, winding path and came to the top of the cliff, and then, out of nowhere, there was a break in the weather, an almost biblical respite, as the rain stopped, the clouds parted, and a rainbow appeared.

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'Rainbow, rainbow,' Jack shouted, hopping from foot to foot, the leaves dancing around him like fire sprites. Then, it was as if something touched him, or someone whispered in his ear, and he stood still, looking up through the column of light that pierced the clouds, as the rainbow faded into the blue sky.

'You OK?'

'What? Yes, fine,' I say, taking a sip of my pint.

'You were miles away.'

'Oh, sorry.'

She doesn't say anything and drinks half of her rum and coke and shakes the ice around in the glass.

'It's all right, Tintagel,' she says. 'I work in the village, at one of the gift shops. My friend works here.' She points at the barmaid, the one with the kind face.

'It's a nice pub.'

'It's OK,' she says. 'Better on the weekend and there's karaoke on Tuesdays.'

'Do you sing?'

She snorts a little. 'Only once, never again.'

'Shame, I'd like to see that,' I say, smiling, holding her gaze.

She laughs and smiles back, then coyly looks away.

'Same again?' I ask. 'I'm having another.'

'Not having something from that, then?' She reaches over and pats my jacket pocket, feeling for my hip flask.

I am annoyed that she has seen me and just as I'm thinking what to say, she gently touches my arm.

'You're not exactly subtle about it, mate.' She looks at her watch and then realises she is not wearing one, so instead checks the time on her phone.

'Go on then. Last one,' she says, chuckling to herself, struggling to get off her stool in her tight skirt. I watch her walk to the toilets – a journey she chastely announces – and I can see

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the outline of her underwear beneath her skirt, the imprint of the bar stool on her thighs.

She smells of perfume when she comes back and she has fixed her make-up and tied back her hair. We order some shots and we are talking and drinking and swigging together from my hip flask and then she is showing me videos of dogs on YouTube, because her family breeds ridgebacks, and then clips of people fighting, people getting knocked out on the street on CCTV, because one of her mates from Camborne was a kick-boxer but he was in prison now, assault.

Then I look up and it is all a blur, a skipping CD, the lights are on, and I can hear the harsh whine of a vacuum cleaner. I wonder if I have fallen asleep, passed out, but Charlie is still there next to me and I see we are now drinking vodka and Red Bull. I look at her and she smiles with wet, drunken eyes and she starts laughing again, pointing to her friend, the barmaid, who is scowling and pushing the hoover round the carpet.

And then we leave, via a brief little farce where she said she thought she should go home, and then we are walking arm in arm along the deserted High Street, giggling and shushing and falling up the stairs to the little flat she has above the gift shop where she works. When we get to the top of the stairs, she looks at me, her mouth shaped like a heart and I feel a rush of boozy lust, so I pull her close to me and we start kissing, my hand reaching under her skirt.

After we finish, we lie on her small single mattress on the floor, without making eye contact, our heads buried into each other's necks. When we have held each other for what seems like an acceptable amount of time, I walk along the hall looking for the bathroom. I fumble for a light switch but it is not the bathroom, it is a child's bedroom. While Charlie's room was sparse,

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unfurnished, this bedroom looks like a showroom in a department store. A light shaped like an aeroplane, mirrored by a giant stencil on the wall. Neatly stacked boxes full of toys. A desk with coloured pencils and stacks of paper. And then, pinned to a board, certificates and awards, for football and judo and being a superstar in school.

Next to the bed there is a night-light and I cannot stop myself from turning it on. I watch as it casts pale-blue moons and stars onto the ceiling. I walk towards the window, breathing in the faint smell of fabric conditioner and children's shampoo. In the corner, I see a little yellow torch, just like one Jack once had. I take it in my hands, feeling the tough plastic, the durable rubber, the big buttons made for young, unskilful fingers.

'Hello,' Charlie says, and it startles me and I jump. Her tone is nearly but not quite a question.

'Sorry,' I stammer, suddenly feeling very sober, my hands beginning to shake. 'I was looking for the bathroom.'

She looks down at my hands and I realise I am still holding the torch.

'My little boy,' she says, a moon from the night-light dancing across her face. 'He's staying with my sister tonight, that's why I'm out on the piss.' She straightens out some paper and crayons, making them symmetrical with the edge of the desk. 'I've just had the room done,' she says, putting something in the drawer of the bedside table. 'Had to sell a lot of my stuff to pay for it, but it looks nice, don't it?'

'It's lovely,' I say, because it really is, and she smiles and we stand like that for a while, watching the planets and stars dance around the room.

I know Charlie wants to ask me something: if I have kids, if I like kids, but I don't want to answer so I kiss her and I can still taste the vodka and cigarettes. I don't think she is comfortable

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kissing me here, in her son's room, as she pulls away, takes the torch out of my hand, and puts it carefully back on the shelf. She turns out the night-light and leads me out of the door.

Back on the single mattress, she pecks me sweetly on the neck, as you would kiss a child goodnight, and then turns away from me and falls asleep without saying a word. Her naked flank is exposed and the room is cold so I reach over and tuck the cover under her and it reminds me of Jack. *Snug as a bug in a rug.* I drink the remainder of my hip flask and lie awake in the pale amber light, listening to her breathe.

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