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Exodus

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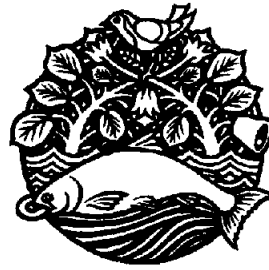
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Extract

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WING



Midwinter 2099

Earth spins. And Wing, the high island, is hurled into the sunless shadow of night.

It's just a minute past three.

The people of Wing are gathering in what's left of their village. Downhill, the salty, sea-lashed streets run straight into churning, cold-boiled ocean. The oldest islanders can remember a time when Wing's folding hills sheered away to sandstone cliffs that plunged on to a wide and rocky shore. The clifftops were still visible at ebb tide last summer, haunting the waves with their dark shadows.

Now it's all ocean.

The people turn their backs to the waves and head uphill through the field of windmills. The slow grind of the wind blades is only a hoarse whisper in this evening of rare midwinter calm. The Pole Star glitters overhead, a tiny torch that guides the islanders to a plateau high in the hills where eleven tall slabs of stone stand in an ancient circle. As the last of the sun's rays fade upon the ocean and night cloaks the island, the people banish all thought of the rising waves that surround them.

Just as their ancestors did, for time out of mind, they

stand in the middle of the standing stones to celebrate the midwinter solstice. Excitement fills the air as fireballs on ropes are set alight. Throwers grasp the long ropes and spin the flaming balls of straw round and round, then send each one hurtling high into the sky. Whoops and cheers echo all across Wing as the darkness is shredded with a cascade of falling stars to mark the death of the old year's sun.

Now a huge wheel, an ancient symbol of the fiery revolution of the stars, is set ablaze and sent whirling downhill. The islanders roar with delight as the fire-wheel flames a great track through the dark, all down the hillside and across the waves, burning itself out like a fading supernova upon the black ocean.

The darkness is absolute. People huddle closer together as it engulfs them, glancing up at the flickering stars for reassurance.

Old Tain feels his way to the centre of the standing stones. He has seen nearly eighty midwinter fires, more than anyone else on the island. He lifts out the ember that he has brought from his own fireside in a clay pot and lights the stack of dried peat and tindery driftwood at the centre of the standing stones. After a while the fire begins to spark and crackle. The people of Wing cheer as light breaks the dark, heralding the new sun that is about to be born.

Tain climbs upon the twelfth stone that lies fallen inside the circle. When he raises a hand the others fall quiet.

'Happy New Year!' he cries. 'Tomorrow we'll see the first sun of a whole new century!'

Tain eyes the happy crowd, knowing they are all anxious to eat and drink and party. He hesitates and the lines that plough his face deepen.

'Maybe the new century will bring us a miracle,' he declares. 'We'll need one to save us from that rising sea . . . But what if the miracle we all hope for doesn't happen? Listen to me. We must begin to plan for the future. We must look out to the world beyond these islands—'

'Oh, Tain, no!' cries Brenna, a small, apple-cheeked woman with a noisy brood of young children. She smiles at him to soften her rebuke. 'We don't want to think of such things on a night like this!'

'This is the very night we *should* think of the future,' Tain responds.

'The children are all here. I don't want them frightened,' argues Brenna, her smile fading.

'It's the children I'm thinking of. It's their future that's at stake if the sea keeps rising and we do nothing,' growls Tain.

An angry muttering starts in the crowd. Brenna's right, people agree, no one wants to think about the sea tonight. The anger swells and voices rise. A few islanders try to defend Tain but they are drowned out by the many who, like Brenna, just want to celebrate and forget. People begin to turn away for home. But a girl, cheeks blazing, dark eyes flashing, her long hair glistening like a midnight ocean, jumps up on to the toppled stone to stand beside the old man and pleads with the crowd to stay and listen to him.

There's a lull as the islanders halt for a moment, their attention caught by the fiery spirit of the girl, by her sheer energy as she stands upon her stone platform like an avenging angel, haloed by the flames of the sunfire behind her.

Tain takes advantage of the lull to try and calm everyone.

'Peace now!' he urges, in pacifying but resigned tones. He puts a steadying hand on the girl's shoulder. 'All right, Mara. Let's all calm down and be happy tonight. But before the celebrations begin, we'll join hands around the sunfire and ready ourselves for the future.'

The people regather and a moment of silence falls as they stand cocooned in the light and heat of their sunfire, snug together within a dark, cold world. A hundred hopes and wishes zip skywards with the sparks and smoke.

Now everyone warms up with steaming mugs of mulled beet-wine and fire-baked potatoes before the trek back down the hillside. The midwinter fires of the other islands scatter the ocean with a constellation of tiny lights that mirrors the fiery network of the skies. The procession ends back in the village as the island's church bell peals, finding its echo in others across the waves. Wing's narrow, huddled streets are soon full of firelight and feasting and rousing songs that drown out the noise of the ocean, long into the night, as the islanders celebrate the living power of the universe.

But Tain's words linger in the air. The new century will surely bring the miracle we need, the islanders tell each other. Earth may have abandoned others to its swallowing seas – people in far distant lands – but, they claim, that could never happen to *us*.

Yet tonight the ocean takes another hungry gulp, reaching further up the hillsides of Wing, ever closer to the village and the farms, towards the very doorsteps of the islanders' homes.

THE SWALLOWING SEA



April 2100

Mara Bell wakens full of restless flutterings, as if there's a tiny bird trapped in her heart.

The air is full of the noise of hammers and saws. Quickly, Mara unbolts her window and unlatches the storm shutters. Sunshine explodes into the room. She blinks, stunned and delighted, then leans out of the window and revels in the sensation of fresh air, in the panorama of sea and sky; an endless, electric blue.

Frantic activity fills the island as the people of Wing take their chance, during this rare lull in the weather, to repair the storm-battered barricades.

'Breakfast, Marabell!' her mother's clear, quick voice calls up, merging her two plain names into one beautiful sound, like water running over stones.

But first, before she does anything else, Mara reaches under her bed for her cyberwizz. The islanders have long abandoned such relics. No one has any use for the old technology now. No one except Mara.

She clicks open the small, solid globe of the cyberwizz, takes out two tiny solar rods that are almost out of power, and lays them on her windowsill to recharge in the sun.

Then Mara flings on her clothes and races downstairs to escape the house she has been trapped in for three interminably long months of storm.

'Hold on, hold on!' Rosemary, her mother, points to the kitchen table with one hand and holds up a hammer in the other. 'I said breakfast, Marabell. Then hammering. Lots of it.'

Mara ruffles her little brother's blond curls, steals a bit of his toast, then zips out of the door before anyone can stop her. At a safe distance down the hillside she turns to wave at her mother who stands at the door, hands on her slim hips, her short, dark hair ruffled by the wind as she shakes her head and brandishes the hammer. But the grin on her face matches her daughter's. Rosemary knows nothing will keep Mara indoors on such a morning. They also both know the storm clouds could easily be back before the sun sets, so every second outside is a gift.

Mara races down through the sloping field of windmills and solar panes. *Free at last!* It feels glorious. The world's wind sweeps across the ocean and wraps her in billows that swirl up her dark fall of hair. The morning sun on her skin is bliss. The neverending blue of sky and ocean is heaven to her eyes after months of dim lantern-light and staring at walls.

When she reaches the hump-backed road bridge where the old red telephone box sits alongside a storm-bent bus stop sign, she pauses. Once upon a time Wing had all sorts of vehicles – buses, cars, motorbikes, lorries and tractors. Mara has seen old photographs of them. But when the fuel ran out, over half a century ago, they were all recycled for other uses. Nowadays, the only vehicle Wing ever sees is the rusted shell of a car that's sometimes swept ashore and eagerly melted down for its metal. But

the islanders could not bear to recycle the metal telephone box or the bus stop sign. They were part of the island's landscape, every bit as much as the church or the standing stones.

Mara feels a tremor of fear as she sees how much the ocean has risen over the winter. The hump-backed bridge runs straight into the waves. The sea can't come any closer, surely. The thought is too awful, so to put it out of her mind she runs to the edge of the waves to see what the storm has cast up.

A shoe! Mara rushes over to grab this precious bit of flotsam that the ocean has flung upon the grass. If she could just find *one* more. She looks down at her burst, heavily-patched terrainers, hand-me-downs from her mother and grandmother. She desperately needs new shoes and doesn't care how mismatched they are. She plans to rip each shoe apart and make herself a brand new pair. Meticulously, Mara searches until she finds a real bounty – a leather bag caught in a large branch at the sea's edge.

Leather *and* driftwood – a real find! She'll give the driftwood to old Tain; he'll understand that she and her family need the leather so badly. But Tain will be able to do plenty with a good lump of wood like this. Mara drags the hefty branch up the hillside to the old man's cottage, where the sound of hammering echoes, as it does from every other house on the island.

'Well!' he grins down from the ladder where he is securing a ripped storm shutter to an upstairs window. 'So you've found treasure!'

Tain descends the ladder slowly but with more agility, Mara judges, than you'd ever expect from a man of almost eighty. He hugs Mara and holds her by the shoulders to look at her.

'You've managed to bloom without sunlight,' he tells her. 'You've grown into a young woman over the winter.'

'Well, I've just turned fifteen.'

Tain nods, smiling. 'I didn't forget. Your present's inside.'

'That wasn't a hint,' laughs Mara.

Tain examines her finds with interest.

'The leather—' Mara begins, apologetically, but Tain cuts in.

'That young brother of yours will be bursting out of his shoes like nobody's business and yours look like they could do with a good bit of mending too. No, Mara, keep your treasure. I'm just fine.'

He stamps his extremely tatty but sturdy boots on the ground.

'I brought the wood for you though,' Mara insists. 'I dragged it all the way up here so don't tell me you won't take it. Look at my hands!'

She holds up her palms, raw from hauling the great branch.

'Ah well, I will then,' he concedes gruffly, but Mara sees deep pleasure soften the lines on his face as he picks up the branch.

'I'll finish off that shutter for you.' Mara picks the hammer from the grass and climbs the ladder.

'I'll boil us up some tea then,' says Tain and he looks suddenly weary. Fit or not, thinks Mara, he really is too old to be doing these repairs himself. But he won't let any of the other islanders help him – a mixture of pride and a selfless awareness of the struggle each household has to maintain a roof over its own head when the storm season hits.

Tain's stone cottage was built over two centuries ago.

The old man was born in it, as was his mother, and her mother before her. The rest of its long history is lost in time. Tain likes to slam a hand upon his home and declare that its rock-solid walls will last till the end of the Earth. Now he stares out at the enclosing sea with eyes that have watched the horizon for the best part of a century, as if he is no longer sure.

Mara loves this cottage as much as Tain does. It's her second home. When she was little, Tain took her under his wing and let her tag along with him as he stacked the peat and fed the goats and turned the cheeses, calling her his little helper, though really it was Tain who was helping Mara, making her glow inside, making her feel important and special when her father was so busy with the farm and her mother all tied up with baby Corey.

'People say it won't happen,' Mara bursts out. 'They say the ocean will settle again in the summer and we'll be safe.'

Now Tain's eyes brew up a look that's as wild as a turbulent sea. He juts out his great craggy chin and puts out a hand to touch the stone wall of his cottage. Silently, he seems to challenge the mighty ocean before he turns on Mara.

'But you can use your eyes, Mara, even if they can't!' he cries. 'You're not a child any more and I won't lie to you. We all have to open our eyes now and look beyond this godforsaken place at the edge of the Earth.'

Mara's heart sinks as she nails the shutter back in place. She has never heard Tain talk in such a way. His family, like hers, has lived on Wing for generations, longer than anyone can remember. Tain has never left the island; he only ever speaks of his heritage with pride. Until now.

A fat house spider scuttles on to the storm shutter. Mara

halts in mid-swing and lets the spider escape on to the window ledge before she smashes the hammer down. She has never left the island, either – at least, not in reality. Mara travels far in her own, secret way but she never tells anyone about these adventures. They belong to her.

Tain beckons Mara to come down off the ladder. When her feet touch the ground he takes her by the shoulders and gently but firmly pulls her round to confront the sea.

'Don't you do the same as the others. Don't look away and fool yourself. They're wrong. There's no great miracle going to save us. The only way we'll be saved is to face up to the truth.'

Mara's heart sinks even more as she looks across the field of whirling windmills and glinting solar panes to where there was once a long shoreline and road, a harbour and the island's school. Just a few years ago, Mara and her friends went to the school. Then the sea claimed it. Even at midwinter you could still see its flat roof. Now it is completely lost.

To the north is a network of small, craggy islands. Once, they were all joined as a single landmass but over the last century the plains and much of the hills have been swallowed by sea and now only the peaks remain. Scattered across the slow-churning ocean, they look like bits of storm-tossed litter. Over the last century many islanders have had to shift homes and farms and entire villages up out of reach of the rising ocean – some more than once. Wing, the largest and highest island, is now overcrowded with refugees from its northern neighbours, who have made makeshift homes in the ruins of its ancient stone cottages and farmyard outhouses.

'Oh, Tain!' wails Mara. 'What can we do?'

Mara feels the bird-like fluttering in her heart once again. This time it's not restlessness, but fear.

Tain sighs and juts out his chin. 'We should have done something long before now. It took *me* long enough to face the truth. But maybe there's still time, if we act now. '

Mara stares out at the ocean, lost in thought. When she turns back to Tain she catches the strange, wistful look he sometimes fixes upon her. Mara knows it's not really to do with her. It's because she looks so like her grandmother did, the girl he grew up with long ago.

'Tea?' she prompts, to bring him back to the present.

'Tea,' he nods, with a shy smile, and they go inside.

Mara munches gratefully on the large, warm, buttery oatcake that Tain hands her. The fresh air and a missed breakfast have made her ravenous. She eats it standing in a pool of sunlight by the open door, reluctant to miss a second of this glorious weather, while Tain stokes the stove and boils up the kettle. Mara finds his peaty brew too strong and bitter so he always makes her mint leaf tea with a spoonful of heather honey, which she loves.

'Tell me about you and Granny Mary,' she says, closing her eyes and lifting her face to the sun like a flower, preferring to fill her thoughts with stories of the old days rather than the threat of the future.

'I've told you all the stories,' he says briskly.

Mara debates whether she dare ask the next question – one that she has had plenty of time to wonder about through the long storm months. That wistful look of Tain's when he remembers Granny Mary has *made* her wonder.

'Did you love her?' she bursts out at last. 'You did, didn't you?'

Tain doesn't answer, just pours out the tea. They sit at

the table in silence, amid the bright sunbeams that spill through the open window.

'Ah, it's all far away in the past now, Mara,' he says at last.

'But—'

'All over and done with. What we need to think of now is the future.'

Mara's mind is spinning. It's just as she suspected. There *was* something between Tain and Granny Mary. That must be why he has always taken such a deep, fond interest in her. She knows she is her grandmother's image; all the old people tell her so and she has seen the striking resemblance in photographs of Granny Mary in her youth – the same intense expression and thick, dark sweep of hair; the same long, lean limbs; and even, says her mother, the same restless way of moving.

But no one has ever suggested that Granny Mary was anything other than happily married to Grandpa and they both died when they were old, so how is it possible that Tain—

'Listen to me, Mara.' Tain's voice breaks into her thoughts. 'Your future is not here on Wing. There might be no Wing left soon – or not enough for us all to live on. Your future lies somewhere else in the world.'

The puzzle of her grandmother's past is abandoned for the moment as Mara's mind fills with more urgent questions.

'What's the world beyond here like, Tain? No one ever talks about it.'

Mara thinks of the places she has seen on her secret travels. Amazing places, so strange and different to the familiar land and seascape that surround her. But her travels are not real, they're only electric visions.

'The outside world is a great mystery now,' says Tain. 'That's why we never talk about it.'

'But what do you *think*?' Mara persists.

Tain sighs heavily. 'I don't know. When the oceans first rose and swallowed the lands, we were all in shock. The supply ships from the mainland suddenly stopped and all our communication systems went down. We were petrified.' He leans forward and Mara sees a tremor of emotion, the reflection of that long ago terror, on his mouth. 'We had no way of knowing what was happening to the rest of the world. And there was so much to do. We had to change our whole way of life, move all our homes and farms far uphill, out of reach of the sea. We had to make ourselves completely self-sufficient in just a few years. All this in the midst of storms like you've never seen. We had barely any time to think of anything beyond ourselves and our own little patch of the world. It was a huge struggle just to survive. But at last, when the seas calmed enough, some of our fishermen set out to see what had happened on the mainland.' Tain pauses again, and the look in his eyes tells Mara he still finds it hard to believe. 'They found nothing but ocean. There were the rocky peaks of what had once been the highlands – solid rock that no one could live on – but no sign of any land. Once we heard that, we turned our thoughts away from the outside world. And that's how we stayed, never looking beyond these islands. Till now.'

Tain grasps Mara's hand in his.

'Mara, the seas are rising again. It happens in surges. Every few decades there's another great meltdown of the ice at the poles and then you get a sea surge. I know the pattern – I've seen it before. We've had long, scorching summers these last years and now we're getting the sea

surge from the meltdown that the weather has caused. I think the last of the polar icecaps must be melting.'

Last summer the heat had burned the island almost barren. Mara remembers air so hot it shimmered like glass. Days so long and bright the relentless sun hardly slipped from the sky. The sea was a haven then – she lived on the rocks like a mermaid, her wet hair a long, cool cloak against the sun, endlessly plunging her burning skin into the soothing balm of the ocean.

'We need to move again,' Tain is saying. 'But not uphill this time – there's not enough land left for us.'

Mara feels panic lurch in her stomach. She grips Tain's hand.

'We need to find a new home in the world,' Tain declares. 'Soon, Mara, before it's too late.'