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Opening Extract from...

Cold Earth

Written by Sarah Moss

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COLD EARTH

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GRANTA

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NINA

I couldn't sleep, the first night here. It was partly excitement, the relief of finally being in Greenland, and partly the light. I think I'd expected midnight sun to be obviously exotic, but it's only slightly different, as if the sun has looked away, and you know what I'm like about sleeping in the day. It felt as if I ought to get up and do some work. I lay there, hot in my sleeping bag, eyes prickling as if I'd got sand in them, and stared at the tent until it seemed to stare back. You were right, I should have got round to a trial run in the park. It's not as easy as it ought to be, putting up tents. The sides looked increasingly lop-sided as the night wore on. I did check for stones before I spread the groundsheet, but the longer I lay there the more stones I seemed to be lying on, and after a while it was clear to me that one of them had a long straight edge and was therefore man-made and in all probability a gravestone. I tried not to think about it. I closed my eyes and counted my breathing, remembering the voice of that Scottish woman on the relaxation tape. Let your fingers soften. Feel your wrists loosen. Shame she sounds like a headmistress moonlighting as a phone-sex worker. Let the tension flow out of your shoulders.

It takes a long time to set fire to a church. Their voices come up the valley in the dark, sniggering and swearing like schoolboys. The stones will never burn, and the turf roof takes a while to dry out, but at last something begins to crackle and pale smoke rises in the dark sky. The men holler and leap as the windows glow orange and the dancing light shows twisted shapes on the ground between the church and the river. A cry echoes over the water from the waiting ship. The last few deaths were not quick or easy. I shiver, huddled on damp turf behind a rock, and try not to think about what will happen to the women on board when the sailors return to the boat. Screams carry a long way across the quiet sea.

I sat up, the tension flowing back. Sometimes it's better to be stressed and awake. Reality is bad enough without having to bear unearthly presences as well, though the headlines I saw at Heathrow open the contested border between one's worst imaginings and *les actualités*. It's usually a mistake to think about the news, I know, but worse when travelling, and a particularly bad idea to think about people you love and the news at the same time when you're nowhere near either of them. There's something about dislocation that makes the news seem horribly probable in a way that it doesn't at home. I want to admit now that I don't really like travelling. I never have. I've been pretending to be brave and sophisticated these last four years, but honestly a cottage in Cornwall, by train to avoid possible pile-ups on the M4, is probably about as far as I'd go if left to myself. Which I do not wish to be.

I do like being a well-travelled person. It sort of makes all those trips worthwhile, the status, and I know I'm good at

planning, but in fact I've always wished that meticulous organisation would displace the obligation actually to go. Maybe I should work for one of those bespoke travel agencies with the art nouveau fonts, putting together exquisite tours for people untrammelled by cost. I always worry most the night before going to America. I like the idea of America, of people who are able to entertain the possibility that strangers might be worth talking to and that there are circumstances in which one might reasonably wish to order lunch in a restaurant after 1.30 pm, but with hours to go before take-off the dark side of freedom becomes apparent. I've seriously thought about hijacking planes after changing my mind over the Atlantic. Officer, there's been a terrible misunderstanding. Take me home. Do you know how many serial killers they have roaming the US at any given moment, looking for random strangers such as lost Englishwomen whose partners are busy in some gallery on whom to perpetrate acts of arbitrary violence? Do you know how many European tourists have been shot by American householders for coming to the door to ask directions? Not to mention drive-by shootings. It's insane to risk a perfectly well-ordered life for some whim like going to America. I always plan to like the hotels, bathrooms sanitised for my protection and lots of clean sheets, but a paper banner saying something is 'sanitised' doesn't mean it's clean. How much effort would you put into a bathroom that's going to be used by people you never see? And in the South it's hopeless, I simply couldn't make myself understood. Not even in French. I was too ashamed to tell you that one day I got faint with hunger in that town outside Atlanta because I couldn't

identify a shop selling food and all attempts to communicate with waiters ended in mutual incomprehension and painful embarrassment. I gave up and spent the day lying on the bed rationing the last of the jelly beans and reading *Daniel Deronda*. I did better in Greece with no Greek.

I've been happier in Europe but not much. I liked the food, but they kill people on purpose quite often in Corsica, and I worried about bombs all the time in restaurants. Italian roads are dangerous, the Swiss have almost as many guns as the Georgians and even the Danes are given to drink-driving. The real reason I wouldn't go to Russia was the horror of making a fool of myself in a place where I can't even read the alphabet, and I applied for that conference in Rome after you planned the trip to Japan. I am sorry. The only place I really enjoyed was Iceland, so cool and beautiful and safe. Do you remember sitting on that hillside after picking all the blueberries? We could hear only birds and wind, and chocolate didn't melt even though it was August, and then later those German backpackers told us it was thirty-five degrees in London. When I rule the world I'm going to set a maximum midday temperature of the point at which good chocolate makes a noise when you break it.

I thought Greenland would be like Iceland, but I wasn't expecting this to be easy. Honestly. It's not one of those times I get over-excited and then fail to cope with the real thing. The headlines made it worse, and remember it was you who insisted I come when my nerve failed at Heathrow. (I keep wondering how many nerves fail at Heathrow, but it's like a wedding, isn't it, once a person has set off down the aisle or

the check-in queue the current of ritual is overpowering.) I can still hear the beating of your heart against my ear and feel the roughness of your cheek against my forehead but I can remember only the words I use for your smell. You stroked my hair and told me I'd like it when I got here, like Australia, but the thing is I didn't like Australia. It was too hot and all the women in Sydney were too elegant. I grant you that neither heat nor elegance is a difficulty in Greenland. I didn't mention the headlines, didn't want you to know that I was thinking about it, but I held you so that now I can still feel your body against mine. Where it belongs. It felt, as it always does feel, an act of violence to walk away from you, there in the departures lounge. I hurt myself when I leave you. If I had looked back I would not be here now. Heat rose behind my eyes. I bit my lip and checked my watch. Hours to go. Claire says trying to keep your eyes open is a surprisingly effective way of getting to sleep. I stared at the pink canvas and waited.

As the flames crackle and the turf roof dries and begins to singe, someone is trying to get out. The sweet smoke of a turf fire rises in the silent valley, and the sheep move nervously towards the river. The priest is trapped in there. I saw him slip in, during the killing, and now I can hear him begging to get out. The glass in the windows – brought from Norway at great expense – has fragmented and fallen onto the soft grass of the churchyard, but I do not think he will get out that way. Flames are reaching up through the window-frames and the timber door is smouldering. He has stopped praying. The noise he is making now rings across the valley and the water in the darkness, and as the flames rise I see a hooded figure in the window, arms stretched out

towards the running river and the empty houses. I am sure he sees me, standing in the pasture where I can feel the heat on my face. The smell of burning changes. The stones at the bottom of the bell-tower are blackening and the bell begins to toll softly as the roof falls in and the sky brightens in the east.

No. I opened my eyes again and the pink stared back. Calm thoughts. Sometimes it works to count the good things from the day before and in the day to come, even if the only thing to look forward to is eating. Tomorrow is another day but at least there will be breakfast. I reminded myself that the stones are only a problem because I'm still thin, not yet like my mother, and forgave myself all the things I ate on the way. Crisps at Heathrow, in case it was my last chance until the autumn, foreigners tending to show a strange resistance to the charms of salt and vinegar flavouring. There's a good bakery at Copenhagen airport and I made the most of it, knowing that rural Greenland won't run to bakeries and being fairly sure Yianni wouldn't let me build an oven. I expect you could bury cakes with hot stones on the beach, the way Nic and Mike did with the clams at Rock Point, but of course the egg supply would be difficult. Anyway, I had some nice pastries and a very good chocolate cake. Not too sweet. And then it occurred to me that there wouldn't be ice-cream here either and there was a sort of gelateria, though in the end it looked better than it was. Synthetic flavours in the raspberry, and the chocolate had a lower cocoa content than I do. I had two hours at Nuuk and ate a pizza more out of boredom than anything else, which was all right considering it was in an airport in Greenland. I

bet the first tomato landed in Greenland after the Second World War. I'm sure Yianni's better organised than we were but I kept remembering how we ended up living on yoghurt and marzipan in Iceland. Well, there are worse ways to survive.

So I was lying there thinking about food, and wondering what ingredients Yianni had brought and what I could do with them, trying not to think about you or dead people or the news or what time it was and how much sleeping time I'd wasted trying not to think about things. I breathed deeply for a bit and then wondered about getting up and going for a walk, and then something outside the tent made a horrible wrenching, tearing noise right by my ear, as if dead hands were forcing themselves up from the grave. Slowly I turned my head, but whatever it was cast no shadow and I couldn't tell if that was because of the angle of the sun or because it was a supernatural presence. I lay with my joints locked, trying to hear more terrible sounds over the thudding in my ears, and it came again, behind my head. I remembered about the windigo. You were away when I wrote about the windigo, but it was part of that stuff about cannibalism, which has more to do with nineteenth-century travel writing than is quite seemly. The windigo is a monster described to Hudson's Bay Company traders by the local Native Americans. It was once a person who ate human flesh and went mad with the desire for more. You can tell a windigo because it sneaks around camps at night emitting a whistling noise that only the intended victim can hear. I wondered if the people in surrounding tents could hear the flesh being ripped and munched, and if so,

whether there was anything I could do to stop it turning to me next. The tent sides quivered in the sun and I held my breath. I wondered how much you would mind if I got eaten by a monster my first night away, and then I thought how much I would mind if you did. Then I started to cry properly and sat up, recklessly alerting all the cannibals and monsters in the valley to my presence. One of them bleated and scampered off, little hooves drumming the turf. An alternative interpretation of available evidence would suggest sheep.

I lay down again and banged my elbow on the probable burial site. The tents are across the river from the church and I'm sure we're not camping on consecrated ground, in which case I decided any burials would be suicides or, more probably in medieval Greenland, secret murder victims. (I know nobody puts memorial stones over secret murder victims – Here Lies the Body, I Dunnit – but that wasn't obvious at two in the morning, OK?) There's a ghost story in one of the sagas William Morris liked about an isolated little bothy at the side of a mountain track, a place for benighted travellers to wait for dawn. Sometimes an angry dead man came out and stabbed everyone while they were asleep. The screams carried down the valley when the wind was in the right direction and the villagers would send for the priest before investigating. I wriggled about, wondering about inscriptions, and started to get cross that Yianni had let me sleep on the grave of a bloodthirsty wraith. I suppose archaeologists have to cope with these things but he knows I don't like them. Being cross is even worse for insomnia than being scared. The sun moved round so hot pink light came straight onto my face and seagulls

started shouting at each other. I gave up on sleep, feared that the nearest I'd get to a shower would be a very cold river and wondered if there was anywhere to pee.

After the fire, an old woman comes out from the silent farmstead and walks down the hill to the church. The walls stand, but the roof has gone and smoke is still rising into the pale sky. A wind carries the smoke at a slow diagonal towards the sea, but the smell of burnt wood hangs in the air as I stand by the river.

The woman moves slowly, like a heron walking, but she is not lame. White hair ruffles around her uncovered head and her grey cloak streams in the wind. When she gets to the church she takes her hand from her cloak and throws something through the window-hole into the smoke. It is heavy like a pebble and glimmers. She turns towards the river and raises her arms, and then begins a low chant. Her voice is strong, and the words carried on the wind are Norse, not the Latin of medieval prayer. I think she knows I am here, but I cannot run from her and panic rises in my throat.

When I woke up the sun was stronger, and I was far too hot in my pyjamas and down bag. A 'two-person tent', I discovered, is big enough for one small person, some chocolate and a lot of books. I kicked one of the poles as I tried to wriggle out of my sleeping bag and the whole thing tilted sideways. I heard Yianni laugh outside.

'Don't stand there laughing at me,' I said. 'Hold it up while I get out.'

His shadow moved up the shiny pink canvas and he grabbed the apex of the poles. I tipped forward and stuck my head out.

I was glad I'd come. The valley is flat and green and the river runs like a road down to the rocky shore. The ruined farm buildings we've come for are scattered up the valley, mainly under the steep, scree-covered slopes that overhang the river and the bright pastures. The sea was dark blue that day and big pieces of bright white ice still drifted in the lapping waves, but the sun was warm and strong on my face and even Yianni, who if you remember wore a jumper in York in June, was wearing the shorts and T-shirt he had last year in Crete. I scrambled out into the sun and stood barefoot on the coarse grass.

'Sleep OK?' he asked. He's grown his hair, but the resemblance to that statue of Paris in the Cast Gallery is undermined by the beginnings of a beard.

'No,' I said. 'What's under that stone?'

'I don't know.' He patted my arm. 'I haven't lifted it up yet.'

'Then how do you know it's not a grave?'

'I don't. But it would be an odd place for it.'

'It's the odd ones you've got to worry about.'

'Nina, anyone buried here has been in the ground at least five hundred years.'

I looked round. Sun and purple pyjamas make wraiths seem unlikely.

'Any chance of some hot water for a wash?'

'No,' he said. 'There's a perfectly good river over there. We can't waste paraffin on washing, we need to boil the drinking water. Go on, it's invigorating.'

I looked at him. I think invigorating is what I said when we got him into the sea at Brighton. Nevertheless, cold is transient but dirt gets worse. I found my towel and headed for the

river, picking my way over the prickly turf and thinking that the Norse women must have walked this way dozens of times a day. He'd put up four tents in the little field bounded by broken drystone walls, but there was no sign of any of the others. Yianni was sitting on a stone facing up the valley, writing in a notebook. I stepped across the pebbles on the river bank and dipped my foot in the water. Even though I knew it was meltwater from the glacier, the water was colder than you'd think it could be without setting. I looked up at the ice and clenched my teeth, knowing that if I didn't wash in the river I wouldn't be washing at all, not for weeks. Foot back on the warm stone, I glanced round at Yianni. He was still looking away, so I dropped my pyjamas on the rocks and floundered in, sitting down before my mind registered the pain in my feet and legs. For a moment I thought I'd never move again and would be found by the next generation of archaeologists, a mad Englishwoman frozen in a Greenlandic river, and then I crawled out, feeling the sun and breeze stroke my bare skin, and struggled back into my sun-baked pyjamas without drying myself.

Yianni looked up as I went by, my feet now numb to the prickly grass.

'Invigorated now?' he asked.

If I'd relaxed my jaw he'd have seen my teeth chattering, so I tried to sweep on as if I wasn't wearing wet pyjamas. There's no way of entering a tent with dignity, and it collapsed on me as soon as I crawled through the flap.

I heard voices while I was struggling to get dressed in a tent which kept subsiding, so I didn't hurry. I guessed the

others had arrived but I could see no reason to expend energy trying to deal with whoever had escorted them, and I was hoping the horses might have gone by the time I came out. The horses were one of the things that could easily have stopped me coming. Yianni's always claimed that there's no recorded case of horses noticing and exploiting their superior strength and size, so I don't know why he let me come on the plane with the tools. He made the others travel by boat as far as the supply ship goes. After that there aren't any roads, it's boats, planes or horses. But he's promised he'll splash out so we can all leave with the finds on the little plane. When he said that I knew he was expecting burials to dig up, biological material that is, like me, too unstable for long journeys.

Anyway, the little plane from Nuuk was fun. There was a pilot called Anders with shiny muscles, and I sat behind him on a box full of trowels and divided my attention between him easing big levers up and down and the landscape, which was spectacular and interestingly close. It's hard to estimate distances over snow, but I realised quite how low we were flying when he pointed out some kayaks crossing an inlet like darting fish. It's not entirely reassuring to be told that it's safer to skim the ice than to take such a small plane through low cloud, so I imagined a future in which you became an Arctic pilot and we lived in a little house by the sea, with white walls and one of those cast-iron stoves. Which is not to suggest that I will ever consider changing my mind about living within walking distance of purveyors of fairly traded coffee beans and hardback books.

I could hear Americans demonstrating team-building skills and putting up tents with unnecessary self-assurance while I wrestled with my underwear. Even once I'd managed to put my bra on while more or less lying down, I didn't hurry. I had the feeling that four weeks with the people I could hear out there would be plenty and there was no sense in starting it any earlier than I had to. When I did come out, hair still a mess because there is no way of brushing long hair in a small tent, two men were leading an alarming number of horses across the bright grass down by the shore, and the field looked as if someone had cut-and-pasted microscope slides of fungus or bacteria onto an Arctic summer landscape. Round and oval tents in unnatural colours had spread across the turf, and the huddle of people on the stones by the river where Yianni had set up the stove looked as if they'd been imported from another image, probably the alumni magazine of some rich American college. I thought I would rather get back in the river than meet a bunch of confident strangers who would have to live with me for the rest of the summer, but I walked towards them, telling myself to listen when they told me their names. I didn't, you know, when I met you at Charles's party. When I went down the next morning and told Helen and Claire that there was a man still asleep in my room, they asked who it was and I had to admit that I had no idea. And then I didn't want you to think I was the kind of woman who slept with men whose names she didn't know so I couldn't ask. I looked at your post and would have called you Stephen had you not taken a message for him before I'd quite decided to risk it.

I was still thinking about that when Yianni introduced them so of course I forgot all the names immediately. There were several very clean-looking Americans who could rise from the rocks while holding cups of instant coffee (I thought Americans knew better than to drink instant coffee) and extending large flat hands and open smiling countenances like something out of Thornton Wilder. They were mostly wearing white T-shirts which appeared to have been ironed and were probably going to go on looking like that no matter how much mud and river water came their way. There was also a Scottish girl who appeared potentially congenial except that she exuded peaceful self-confidence, which is doubtless a fine quality to have but unnerving for the rest of us. I know you say people sense unease and become uneasy, a bit like dogs sensing fear and becoming aggressive. All it means is that the bad behaviour of people and dogs is my fault. I don't know how that's meant to help.

Everyone stood about as if the rocks had got too hot to sit on after we'd all expressed the statutory and fictional pleasure in first encounters. Reading Henry James, you'd think it's the Old World that's meant to be courteous but Americans practise levels of politeness unknown to the English bourgeoisie. The prospect of trying to beat American good manners before breakfast made me feel like a bird in a net. I went and sat on the grass next to the Scottish girl, who looked at the Americans and then at me and sat down too. Pebbles wavered through the clear water at our feet and a white cloud processed across the dark screes above the valley. Yianni turned back to the Primus and began to dole stewed dried fruit from

a steaming pan into chipped enamel dishes. I could see that it was filling and would prevent scurvy. The Scottish girl was also watching him and it became clear that one of us needed to say something. I tried to relax my shoulders.

'Do you think the water is as warm as it looks?' she asked.

I glanced at her. She was looking at the river with a slight frown, as if she'd lost something in it.

'No,' I said. 'I tried to wash in it earlier. It feels colder than water.'

'Oh,' she said. 'Oh well. It's good clean dirt, on digs.'

'It'll have to be.' I couldn't imagine I'd be able to con myself back into the river now I knew what it was like. 'We can't put any soap or shampoo into the water anyway.'

'No,' she said. 'No rubbish, no fires, no soap. No picking anything that grows and no planting anything that doesn't. Good thing the Greenlanders didn't think like that, isn't it, there'd be nothing here for us to find.'

'Maybe they did,' I said. 'Maybe that's what happened. They weren't raped and pillaged by pirates or starved by climate change and they didn't all go to America or back to Iceland, they just went green and trod so lightly on the earth that nobody knows they were there.'

'Maybe,' said Yianni, passing us each a bowl. 'But there'd still be bodies. Even if they had wicker coffins. Or ashes. You can't just disappear the dead. That's the point about archaeology. People can't help leaving themselves.'

I shivered. The enamel dish was too hot and I put it down.

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I've already forgotten your name. I'm awful at listening to introductions.'

'I'm Catriona,' she said. 'And you're Nina? Are you the one from Oxford, with the scholarship? Yianni told me. You must be really good.'

I have no idea what the right answer to this might be. Yes, I'm brilliant. No, I'm very thick but good at deceiving learned committees. The cloud had nearly passed the mountain.

'I live in London now,' I said. 'My partner has a job there.'

I wondered if you had finished painting the bedroom and how my orchid was responding to your ministrations. I thought of you standing on the step locking the door on a silent flat each morning and returning to the takeaway menus on the mat and the crumbs on the table in the evening.

'Do you like it?' she asked.

'No,' I said. 'I miss Oxford. But David likes his job, and I can work just as well in the British Library as the Bodleian. I just happen to prefer old buildings where my friends are to curved wood and strangers.'

'But you do the nineteenth century, is that right?'

I wondered why Yianni had told her about me and not me about her, and what else he might have said. Do you warn people, before they meet me? I picked up the dish again and prodded a grainy pear.

'Yeah,' I said. 'English lit. I'm looking at the influence of Old Norse sagas on Victorian poetry. Mostly the Pre-Raphaelites so far, though I'm getting into ghost stories. And then I got a grant. Well, not really. But there's a bequest fund you can apply to for research-related travel. I just need to write something explaining how being here helps with my doctorate. It doesn't,

really, that's the whole point, that the Vikings turned into a Victorian fantasy, but I'll make something up. I've always wanted to go to Greenland and Yianni said I could come if I didn't mind being unskilled labour.'

And when he said 'unskilled labour' you put your glass down and said everyone should try manual work once in a lifetime, you in your hand-made shirt, and when we laughed you said you'd helped in the conservation department when you started at Sotheby's. At least I get soil under my nails. If not worse.

'You do medieval archaeology?' I asked.

She nodded. A breeze stirred her Flemish Madonna hair.

'Faroese, mostly. Early medieval North Atlantic migration patterns. I end up reading bits of oceanography as well.'

'Has the Atlantic changed in eight centuries?' I asked.

'Well, some people think so and some not. Temperatures change but no one's sure what effect that has.'

One of the Americans leant forward, a short guy with red hair that stood up like thistledown and an All-American jawline.

'Cool thesis,' he said. 'Funny how other people's doctorates are always cooler than mine.'

'You're not American,' I heard myself say.

He looked at me. 'Should I be?'

The blades of grass are hard to tear, tougher than the green stuff at home.

'No. I just thought you all were. Sorry.'

'What's your doctorate?' asked Catriona, eating an apricot that lay in her spoon like an egg yolk.

'Cultivation and foraging in liminal settlement areas in Norway,' he said. 'I'm working with Brian Claridge, at Madison.' He looked at me. 'So you're right, I am based in the US. I'm from Sheffield.'

'Sorry,' I muttered. You tell me to pretend to be confident. I took a breath. 'What are liminal settlement areas?'

'Places where people can only live in good years,' said Catriona. 'Right on the edge of habitability.'

The red-head tipped his bowl. 'So in northern Norway, you find houses or even villages that seem to have been deserted for a few decades then rebuilt and then deserted again. The main stress factor is plague but short-term variations in climate do it as well.'

I poured juice from my spoon back into the bowl. I could see why he thought other people's research was more fun. 'You could use that to analyse the property market.'

'I expect someone does,' said Catriona. 'I met Brian Claridge at the NACR conference last year. Were you there?'

The deceptive All-American jaw was chewing but he shook his head.

The other guy put down his empty plate. He was tall, with those big American shoulders that bespeak a childhood diet of beef full of growth hormones. 'I've got a friend who's working on the anthropology of surfing at the University of Hawaii,' he said. He really was American.

We all looked out at the ice gliding across the black water and the river swirling over the pebbles and saw the point of Hawaii.

'My friend Mike wants one called "Consuming Passions:

Restaurants in Twentieth-Century French Film",' I offered. 'But what he actually does is auditory neurophysics.'

'Sounds more lucrative than French film,' muttered Yianni. 'Or medieval archaeology.'

'I'd like to be in Venice.' Catriona put her bowl on the rock and stretched out her legs. 'How about, "Representations of Power in Seventeenth-Century Venetian Portraiture". Though I always wonder about the stuff that's never been called up in copyright libraries. You could do something on the unread holdings of the British Library.'

'I know,' I said. 'I always think the most interesting work would be on the bits of history that got lost. I mean, that's a lot of the appeal of the Greenlanders, isn't it? We want everyone to leave a story. And those lost Americans. You know, the early colonists. The ones who just disappeared.'

'Roanoke,' said the fake American.

'Anyway, I bet the unread holdings of the BL are probably mostly railway handbooks and things,' I said. There were apple rings left cold and wet on my plate and I thought they could probably stay there. 'That and things people would be too embarrassed to read in Humanities Two. Mills and Boon. Venice sounds better.'

The American woman cleared her throat. Her hair was perfectly tidy, as if she was expecting to be photographed, and I saw that she was wearing make-up, the kind of expensive, cunning make-up that betokens years of practice. It looked as if someone had dropped a Barbie doll on the grass. I found myself fingering a spot on my chin that I'd earlier decided didn't exist as long as I didn't have a mirror to see it. I thought

The Beauty Myth was compulsory reading for preppie American women, so often in search of victim status.

'"Reading and Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century American Children's Literature,"' she said. She didn't sound as American as she looked, one of those voices drifting in the mid-Atlantic that sounds fake whichever side you're on. Her stewed fruit was still floating like dead goldfish in her bowl. You'd have to be seriously screwed up about food to worry about the calories in a stewed apricot.

'What in particular?' I asked. 'I do nineteenth-century English lit.'

She addressed the ground at my feet.

'Oh, I've always liked *Little Women*,' she said. 'And Laura Ingalls Wilder.'

'Hoop skirts and home baking,' I said. 'There were women in nineteenth-century public life, you know. Qualifying as doctors and campaigning in politics.'

She moved her gaze to my jeans. 'I know. But there were hoop skirts and home baking as well.'

Yianni stood up.

'If you've all finished breakfast, let's look around the site. I'll wash up while you get your notebooks.'

'Where do I brush my teeth?' asked the woman with the hair.

Yianni grinned. 'Anywhere you like. There's drinking water in the stores tent. But don't spit the toothpaste.'

'What am I supposed to do with it?' She seemed to be asking a rock to the left of his shoulder.

He shrugged. 'Swallow?'

The fake American smirked.

'That's what I did last night,' I said. 'It can't be poisonous.'

She took a breath and then shrugged. 'OK.'

'I'm sure we'll get used to it,' said the Hawaiian surfer's friend. 'Just use less.' We walked back towards the camp in silence and I watched as the others crawled into their tents. Catriona and then the tall guy came out with spiral-bound notebooks. I'd brought this notebook and one for 'research', whatever form that might take, so I found the back of the printout of my flight times that you made while I showered that last morning at home. It occurred to me that pieces of paper would not rise from the turf the way they rise from all flat surfaces at home. I watched a sheep wander between the tents, cropping industriously. The components of vellum are still more readily available here than paper.

Yianni was standing at the other side of the river, among sticks and strings marking out a grid across crumbling stone walls. Even I could see ridges in the turf and oddly square patches of vegetation, and at one side there were lines of stones which I couldn't imagine had really been there for eight hundred years. A shallow trench still ran from the river through the fallen stones and down to the sea. The medieval Greenlanders had running water, did you know that? And saunas and frozen-food stores in the cellars.

Catriona joined me.

'Has he already shown you round?' she asked.

I shook my head. 'I only arrived last night. There were all the stores and tools to deal with. I probably know less about the site than you do.'

'I only know what Yianni's told me,' she said. 'It's an odd one, easily accessible from the sea but probably inhabited late. Mostly the late ones are inland. The ones you can see from the open sea got raided as soon as the cod fishermen found them undefended.'

We set off across the field.

'Is that what you think finished them off?' I asked. 'Pirate raids?'

Out at sea, the horizon was a straight line where dark water met grey sky. You'd see anyone coming long before they landed. But maybe not before they saw you.

'Some of them,' she said. 'And some of them probably found their farming methods weren't working anymore when the climate cooled. I don't think there's a dramatic end, just life getting steadily more difficult for a few generations, maybe raised mortality and less food, until the people who could leave left. But most of the sites here look more like the Clearances and Ben's liminal settlement areas than the Potato Famine. There'd be more burials, and mass graves, if they had plague or acute famine.'

I thought about the headlines again. Mass graves. We were coming to the river, and the Americans were already finding stepping stones.

'Did you hear any news, on your way here?' I asked.

'Not especially.' She put her notebook in the pocket of her green cagoule. 'Oh, you mean the virus thing?'

'Mm.' A fish flicked the surface of the river.

'It's just a media panic. I wouldn't worry. Easy journalism for August. Remember last time, people were actually buying

masks and spending God knows how much on fake vaccine on the internet and then the papers lost interest and we got scared about something else. Honestly, by the time we get back everyone'll be worrying about the property market again.'

'My partner David says it's a smokescreen for something else. Either the Americans are going to say terrorists have been spreading germs so we need to invade somewhere else with oil or they have invaded somewhere else with oil but Americans are too scared of other people's handkerchiefs to notice.'

'He likes his conspiracy theories, then?'

I looked up. 'There was that thing about crop sprayers.'

'Precious little evidence for it.'

Our own Americans were reaching the other side of the river, having repositioned a series of rocks so the woman could avoid getting her feet wet. The tall guy gave her his hand as she made the last jump.

'Anyway, a proper pandemic might be quite good for the environment,' said Catriona. 'It's probably about the only way of arresting climate change now. Depopulation from the plague did wonders for medieval fauna and flora. But last I heard it was a few children in Delhi, a hypochondriac American vet with a cold and maybe some wild birds. Are you going first or shall I?'

'You,' I said.

She stepped across the stones as if they were a zebra crossing. I followed quickly so she couldn't see my alarms and hesitations, making the last leap by concentrating on the skyline where the rocks rose from the slopes of scree. It wasn't cold water I feared, but humiliation.

'So this is the big farm,' Yianni said. The walls were waist-high

and several feet thick. 'We're standing in the hall. Those are the ante-rooms.' He pointed to more heaps of stone.

'Is that the lintel?' asked the tall guy.

'Yeah,' said Yianni. He pointed. 'There's the mantel. It was some fireplace.'

There was a long, flat rock, as big as the standing stones we used to walk round in the Dales when my grandparents were alive.

'How did they lift that?' I asked.

'We think they had rollers,' said Yianni. 'There are bigger stones than that in the church. The trench, of course, brings water.'

'They had a good view,' said Catriona, standing by the lintel-stone. 'Odd, though, to face the door into the prevailing wind. Or do you think this has been moved?'

'Don't think so,' said Yianni. 'Maybe it was worth the wind to be able to see what was coming.'

'There's a cross on the lintel,' said the smaller guy.

'I know,' said Yianni. 'And it's old. But of course it could have been carved in situ at any time.'

I stood next to Catriona. The view of the hill and the river curving down to the stony beach was exactly what I'd been imagining at my desk at home, and I caught myself thinking the site was wasted as a ruin and wanting to do it up and move in. The opposite of archaeology.

'I told you in the briefing papers that this is the site Norman MacDonald identified with the farm owned by Bjorn Bardarson in *Bjornsaga*. Late thirteenth century. The saga says his brother burnt down the byre. This byre was

burnt and doesn't seem to have been rebuilt, and once we get the dating done we should know when the farm was abandoned. We've got farm V49 fifteen kilometres south, and I spoke to Adam Morris about his work there before I left. He's sure it was still occupied in the late fourteenth, so if this was abandoned earlier we probably can tie it into the saga. But we'll see.'

He started talking about the lab analyses of V49 and Adam Morris's unpublished work. It was still warm, but there were grey clouds gathering in the northwest and the sea looked duller than it had. *Bjornsaga* is the one with Ingibjorg and Kristin. They were twin sisters, and their father was tangentially involved in a long-running feud of the sort that defines most of the sagas. One day Kristin was found dead and 'unpleasantly damaged' on the beach. No one knew who'd killed her, or trusted their guesswork enough to attempt vengeance, which was the usual way of stopping the dead coming back. They buried her quickly and thoroughly because everyone expected someone killed like that to make trouble. She did. Every night she came creeping into Ingibjorg's bed in a state of advancing decomposition, muttering allegations, until Ingibjorg 'spoke no more sense but uttered strange prophecies until she died.' After that one or other of them often sat on the roof of the house and woke people by shouting, but that bothers me less. It's the idea of someone who loves you turning into a revenant who comes to decompose in your bed and drive you mad that's particularly disturbing. Would you rather be haunted by your rotting beloved or lose her entirely? I think I'd be good at haunting.