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A week after she heard the news, she deleted all her social media profiles.

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A white bear is swimming through black water with elegantly long strokes, maybe catching fish, maybe just crossing from one iceberg to another. But the camera slowly pans back, retreating into the sky, to reveal there is no ice for the swimmer to clamber onto.

She had not expected to be so affected by Attenborough's worthy documentary – this blockbusting 'farewell to the wild' made for mass consumption: an orangutan waving from a palm tree against a wide, flat horizon; the elaborate mating dance of a solitary exotic bird, so rarely witnessed nowadays, on a dance floor that is disappearing.

Recently, almost-forgotten noises have been returning to her in dreams: the rustle between long, tall tree-trunks *you thought they were giant spikes that hooked the sky down and kept it joined onto the land* and the creaking of treetops under the force of buffeting winds, the crack of branches under the tread of non-humans. Noises heard in places where there were no people – which was normal.

Another place, deep under the water: a belt of smooth sand amid a dark swaying forest of brown seaweed on which there would be strange forms that swam off, startled, when she reached for them *but here comes Octopus again – who you go on steering away from...*

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In the morning, still visited by her dreams – floating images of a planet that is not her own – she is waiting patiently beside the hissing percolator, listening to its gurgles and smelling the aroma, and for this moment of the day (at least) she is able to feel a kind of connexion: first to the Italian producers and the Columbian coffee pickers – gratitude – and then to the wilderness that is inexorably disappearing into her coffee cup. Next she sits down for her usual scroll through the latest posts on her timeline before starting on emails, and instantly she is deafened by the clamorous crowing of condolences. It is some moments before she discovers who the crows are clustered around and cawing over; finds out what it is they ‘can’t understand’. He was inside her exactly four days ago, they have not fixed the time of their next meeting but she’s been in no doubt it will be soon – she knows how long they can go before desire overtakes them again. But – it comes suddenly – he has died. Why? Nobody is saying.

She tries to visualise the inert body on the sofa in his studio, the material presence of him. He cannot have simply annihilated himself – it’s just a change of state. She has learned from hours of Alan Watts’s Buddhist wisdom on youtube to accept the incomprehensibility of this change of energy – this disappearing – but right now the transformation of our being within the universe is meaningless. It’s all just ideas. What is real is his hand on her head as she kneels before him. Her mind wanders over his familiar body; dwells on her last sight of it. Until she is able to touch it, all of that is only words. The twitterings of those nodding black heads, the ‘rest in peace’ and ‘miss u 4 ever’, Watts’s notion of a mere ‘changed energy’ as we pass into a different life – all false. Only his body is real. She clings to this thought, its simple logic.

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“People have gotten so disconnected they feel like they’re falling down a black hole. If you have no social network – like, you’re not in a secure web of relationships – you lose your mind,” declared

the social worker she stayed with when couch-surfing across the US. They would share joints on his fire escape. “We need connectedness with other human beings; a feeling of bonding, of belonging. You know what – sometimes when old women die, their husbands commit suicide. It keeps happening to me.”

But his comment on the human condition only addressed one dimension of reality. Like Newton’s laws of gravity, like Einstein’s theory of relativity, like the new theories of quantum biology, the limitations of a human paradigm eventually become apparent, and it is replaced by a new paradigm, thus creating a space that did not previously exist. Just as there are certain phenomena which evade the laws of gravity, there are certain human beings who do not connect into a web.

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Each morning she would sit in this rectangle of sunlight by the window with a coffee to hand and each morning open her laptop to write, translate, and answer emails – her connexions purely virtual, by the frailest of filaments. No appointments, no meetings, no real connecting with people, just phone-calls with colleagues, writers, translators, editors, subscribers. Her only physical encounters, other than a rare coffee or a birthday lunch, were her hook-ups with Igor.

If anyone had said she was lonely she wouldn’t have understood, the word ‘alone’ being the basic condition of every human being; of all beings, in fact – although there would be certain variables in how you connected with others if you were a mackerel in a shoal or a solitary octopus. And obviously no-one is alone when in the great outdoors. The sensations of grass beneath your bare feet, rain trickling down your collar, surprise at a branch snapping in the woods – the world she would gaze at wistfully on her monitor – all of this refuted the equation, by some people, of solitude with emptiness.

Her most acute sense of the world – this planet of hers, situated in space – came from having looked down from a plane window between rips of cloud at the continent below, the blueness beyond it, the horizon's curved line – the Earth visibly round, and so very small; nowhere near big enough to encompass the New World, the Chinese world, the Indian world, all those jostling, mutually exclusive entities that deny the reality of the globe and furthermore, exclude other creatures – orangutans; herself.

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The day after she closed the door of Insomnia Graphics, leaving him in his studio on the uncomfortable faux-leather sofa, he was driving home along the highway – it was a rainy morning and he must have been lost in negative thoughts – when he was crashed into by a carload of revelers returning from a party. Everyone in that car survived. After a brief period of shock, the main thought of the driver, who had rapidly sobered up, was that the adverse weather conditions might hopefully shorten his jail term. After all, when you have your whole life ahead of you there is really no point in dwelling on someone who is no more.

The coroner and the policewoman who were collecting the pieces of skull into a bag gave no thought to what the thoughts of the deceased might have been. In fact they were avoiding altogether the thought that this was a human, blotting out that the pieces they were looking for in the grass verge added up to a person. The policewoman was instead thinking about her child who had fallen ill during the night and was at home alone waiting for her; meanwhile the rain (not sufficiently torrential to swill away the blood) was dripping from the hems of her protective trousers and running uncomfortably into her shoes.

And Igor's wife will soon need to think about how to explain his absence to their daughter, once it starts dragging on noticeably. Might she eventually just forget him? Probably not, he'd been a magnet, his child had wanted to go everywhere with him, she'd gobbled up as much of her father as she could get. Back when her husband was still being amicable she would always consult him on parenting issues because he'd had sensible ideas. What should she do now?

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She does not exist, no-one has informed her about the funeral nor has she been able to find out – not from social media, nor the cursory newspaper announcement – the cause of death. No one knows about her and Igor, about their late-night chats, how he would toy with her, how they led one another to the dark side... and how, over the last months, she gradually revealed to him her suffering, and her need for him to obliterate this with a greater pain. She undressed for him online, in front of the camera, their first session going on for hours, it was hard to separate out the sex and their interior sensual play, the entwining of their minds. Their relationship has been in an in-between space, a new thing for both of them, a new way of relating having absolutely no connexion to their networks of physical acquaintances and families. They have been invisible – to each other, to everyone – touching across distance. Since he spent most of his days in virtual reality, and her job is to create worlds in her mind, it has felt normal.

But it didn't remain purely virtual. She's been to see him at his studio, though without knowing what to wear; they never discussed that, so she didn't know his preferences. How do toys dress? Surely in something cute and eye-catching. There was an air of the TV variety show about it – the dressing up, the roles. Or maybe the school playground – physical game-playing, exertion.

When moving, as normal, through her space – kitchen to bathroom, then living room – the remembered smell of his skin brings a sudden stab of pain. She doubles over and gasps for air, then collapses, convulsing, against the wall, her lungs taking great involuntary gulps, though still there are no tears. Having regained herself, she lies for a long time on the hallway floor between the two doors, staring at her shoes.

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From the table by the window she is looking down into the courtyard where the morning fog has extinguished all colour. Leafless branches drip wetly, and there are no birds, not even the pigeons that normally roost on the rooftops, until a lone crow descends from the edge of the roof to the ground beneath the yard's single tree. The crow flies back up, in her beak a squarish object which she places on the roof's apex before strutting away along it, only to strut back, pick up the block and carry it over to the next roof. This action is repeated over and over for quite some time, and it holds Hana's gaze with a kind of magnetism – she can't tear her eyes away. Even if it is just work-avoidance, it feels like something more – to have this curiosity about another species.

And she notices something odd: of the four roofs that border the courtyard, the crow is only moving between the three Hana can see onto. She comes to land on the ridge of the roof about ten metres away and, looking at Hana, drops an object. There is no longer any doubt: the crow is bored, and is doing all this carrying back and forth in the awareness that she is observed, and is amusing herself by providing her observer with entertainment.

She flinches in the discomforting realisation that she herself is being observed, and she laughs, at which the crow cocks her head, and their eyes engage, and for a split second this live connexion – so unexpected! – surges through her like an electric current. The bird has exposed her as a voyeur,

but she cannot bring herself to move away. After a while the crow flies off, indifferent to the thing on the roof, which she simply abandons.

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Those sudden convulsions that left her gasping for air keep on happening, and she starts switching off her mobile phone, answering only work emails – and those with abruptness, batting off the occasional query about her well-being. She picks up a pressing translation job, and stops writing. In the afternoons she moves from the sun at her east-facing desk to the sofa in the western light, not switching on the lamp even as the day fades. Winter is coming and she feels ever more cornered by the narrowing rectangle of light where she sits. The precious sunlit hours when she can make herself move around the flat, pin her hair up, drink coffee, look out the window, get squeezed by the nights into ever shorter days. The deadlines for translation contracts close in, as she stares catatonically at her monitor.

As the day ends she braces herself for the coming darkness, there on her island by the window, and she does not move until morning. She doesn't read, but will sometimes simply stare at the shifting light and shade on her huge TV screen. If asked, she couldn't say what she is looking at, but anyway there is no-one to do the asking. The few people with whom she is in contact are not particularly worried about her, they're all busily social in the centres of their own relationship webs, to which she is only loosely connected, on an outer ring. For the first time she is acutely aware of the insubstantiality of the connexions between her own centre and the rest of the world. Such bonds as she has are incredibly fragile filaments. As dusk falls, the encroaching darkness feels hostile.

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Dear Hana,

we don't know each other, and I'll be brief: I'm writing from Buenos Aires to say that Iosi Enríquez has disappeared. I know you were in contact – he was a great admirer of your writings. If he wrote anything to you in recent months that sounded like he was planning a change of scene, please let me know.

Victoria Storni

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She only notices the short email a few days later in her spam. *Ha! All the men in your world disappearing.* It was evidently mis-directed there by Q. No – Iosi must be close with dozens of people in Buenos Aires, but there'd been zero closeness between Iosi and her. He might have been around when she was over there doing the readings from her travel novels, but they'd never actually met, he only started writing to her later and it was always via social media. She is now struck by the thought that when her profiles disappeared, Iosi did. *Oh you're such an influencer – having a domino effect.*

She can't remember anything in particular from their brief exchanges, nor can she, of course, scroll through the now non-existent profile. But Iosi's messages complimenting her books, which he was discussing with his high school students in World Literature, had a kind of intensity. She had sometimes vaguely wondered how come she'd merited space on a syllabus which must already have been densely populated with authors, and she now feels a bit rueful for not having summoned the energy to respond to his detailed questions. Iosi was after all a genial young guy; very attractive in

fact, judging by his photograph and his quiet patience in combination with occasional effusive outpourings; furthermore a passion for literature is a sign of a deep thinker. But why should she have encouraged this contact from a man ten years her junior who lived on a different continent? She dismisses the flattering thought that he might have been attracted to her, and the twinge of guilt at her unresponsiveness, which was why they had not connected. She has never known how to reciprocate when someone comes on to her. Certainly she herself hadn't done any chasing.

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Hello Victoria *Hmm – can't make yourself call her Dear – what's that saying?*

I can't really help you because I've gone and deleted my profile where all Iosi's messages were. I don't remember anything unusual, but he didn't talk to me anyway about his private plans, he only wrote about literature. We didn't know each other very well. May I ask where he's disappeared to? *Change that dumb question – she obviously doesn't know – but the truth is, you're genuinely intrigued.* Under what circumstances did he disappear, and do you have any clues? Are the police involved? Please let me know.

Regards,

Hana

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She is eight years old, and half of her memory is taken up with long summers in which the most exciting mysteries of her life are located in an underwater belt of sand a hundred metres from the shore. A whole world resides on the smooth clearing between forests of brown seaweed in this alien element where, peering upwards, she is captivated by darts of light scattering through the water. She

can never belong to this cool, blue-hued world in which she cannot breathe, but if she reaches the seabed quickly enough she can hang on to a clump of weed and for a few relished moments become entranced. Sometimes she sees an electric ray – a rock coming to life – a spaceship, rising, moving away from her, metre by metre.

Several times a day she manages to slip away from the adults and return to the seabed, staying below water for longer and longer, her thoughts roving around the alien universe of that sandy clearing, and everything above the water becomes uninteresting: walks to the ice-cream parlour, the outdoor cinema that opens only in summer, the towers people build on the beach out of pebbles. She has discovered a new space, but she cannot share it with anyone; in fact when she is in it she can't even speak – she is a foreigner. In those treasured moments on the seabed she tries to be still, merge into her surroundings, observe. She has already learned a lot about the limitations of her body, how precious time is, and how, when she is underwater, her self-reliance is absolute, as she holds fast to the seaweed to anchor herself to the surface of the world.

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Her gulps for air jolt her into consciousness, release her from the nightmare. She is always on a dark island, where the dark swallows her until she is suffocating, her constricted lungs contracting, her desperate gasps getting shallower as Igor's hands determinedly hold her head underwater until she wakes herself up, having nearly suffocated out of sheer terror.

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Ouch – curt response – Vic can't even offer a polite 'Hi'

Nobody knows anything or if they do they're not letting on. Iosi set off to the south of the continent, to Ushuaia, to look for work, but we don't know how far he got. Passing acquaintances? I think not – he liked you a little more than that. You touched him. So to speak.

Victoria

You touched him.

If you want, you can carry on living like this for the rest of your days – hanging onto seaweed to anchor yourself in your own little world. Telling yourself nothing you do has any bearing on the world; nothing – not even the death of your lover – has anything to do with you; telling yourself your writing was of zero importance to Iosi's students, and the passion in Iosi's messages was just him being effusive about your work, and there was nothing selfish about deciding to have one last hook-up with Igor; even though you'd noted how unstable he was, and knew of the fights with his wife, and then having turned up at his place, there was nothing selfish about deciding to leave again because you couldn't deal with his weird numbness why did he allow me to come by, if he was going to be like that, all angry and absent face it – you knew he was feeling fucked, he felt so badly fucked and then you showed up and forced yourself on him and he got even more fucked but we talked too, it wasn't only fucking, I went to see him because I thought it might distract him, get him out of his state how selfless! you didn't even call him that morning but I couldn't save him yes, that is correct, you failed to save him I know, I know, I know, I didn't save him, and I don't know what to do now do? now? tsk – go back to sleep.