

A teardrop of perspiration runs down my spine. My hands are sweating and they need to dry so I rest against the rock-face until my breathing slows down. The warm air wafts up the stinky honey smell of rape-blossom, and there's no choice but to suck it in. I look at my sweaty hands, splayed to either side of me, and the sunlight reflects off the dragonfly charm that's always tied on my left wrist. The emerald body glints and makes me catch my breath for a second because it reminds me of my little girl, and a wave of love runs through me.

When Poppy was born seven years ago, she was a perfect miracle and my tiny daughter completely blew me away. Even so, that huge love didn't stop me from missing great chunks of her childhood, and in between the quick flashes of my home leave, she grew up. My lovely girl with her blue eyes, and black hair falling in little waves. She was always on my mind, and wherever I was in the world, I always brought her presents. Mostly trinkets and souvenirs, but nothing that would make her think too deeply of where I'd really been. When she was five, I gave her a dragonfly hair slide. She wore it all the time and refused to take it off, even for bed. I remember its emerald body flitting through the dark seas of her hair while she slept.

In some ways, life was easier before my discharge because I only had to deal with domestic life in small, manageable bites. Short breaks at home with the emotional grand reunions, the hero's welcome and then, just before the magic wore off, it was back to real life. It's impossible for me to settle back into civilian ways, and there's been any number of shiny-bum jobs, but sitting behind a desk makes me feel trapped. So most of my days are spent up here, climbing. 'Avoidance' the shrinks call it, and maybe they're right, but it's the only thing that keeps me half-sane. It's a damned sight better than anything they've got on offer, and it's certainly better than going back into hospital.

Every day I go out, ignoring the pleading look on Laura's face, and I climb, crunch and grind my way up unforgiving granite faces to escape from myself. It's a form of mental

manipulation really, and I've learned plenty of techniques during my long history of messing with people's minds. It's certainly easy enough to mess with my own, it's just a case of moving the furniture of my mind around to confuse myself. If I can trick my perception for long enough, then everything is normal, everything is okay. And all those dreadful dreams will stay on the other side.

My hands are still sweating. It's not really the best place to do this, because the ledge under me is barely quarter of an inch deep, but I need to get some chalk on, which means taking a hand off the rock. So I force my knee into a crevice and the bone crunches where it broke last year. The rock grazes my face, but I can just get my right hand into the chalk bag. Now that it's cool and dry enough to get a better grip on things, I manage to get my left hand chalked up too. My leg muscles have started to burn, so it's time to get moving again.

The next hold's in sight, it's only a shallow finger-hold against an almost smooth wall and I push up with my legs, ready to reach with my hand. But someone's beaten me to it. There's a little ladybird, just sitting there, spottily looking at me. The sun blazes my hair, my legs tremble, sweat seeps through my chalky palms, my heart races, and it's time to move or I'll be off. Falling, falling, falling until... no more Damian. I glare at the little bug, then try to blow her away. There's a prickle in my armpits and the acrid tang of adrenaline blooms from me, so I reach up. Surely the stupid creature will fly away.

'Go on, Ladybird, fuck off away home. Christ almighty! Your house is on fire and your children are gone.'

It still sits there. My duff knee is shaking now, so there's no choice, it's her or me. I stretch up, nip my fingers together and pinch the ledge. The ladybird dies with a definite crack and her soul rushes up my nose in a bouquet of earth and air and children's smiles. Finally my breathing stills, feeling the crushed little body on my fingertips. So many crushed little bodies on my fingertips. Even spitting doesn't take away the taste of blood in my

mouth. And then I'm off, free-falling. Some days I don't use a rope. Having a safety net makes me lazy and careless, and if I fall from any great height, there's the risk of a broken pelvis which would mean no more climbing. Who'd want to live like that?

Today isn't one of those days and I drop backwards, shielding my head, waiting for the tightening rope and the jolt to my hips. Nothing snaps, and I'm dangling with my heavy head and limbs dragging me to earth with only this harness to hold me, to stop my body melting down. The strength has drained from me and I hang, spinning slowly, out of control, watching the big bowl of blue sky turning above me. I listen to the creak and enjoy wondering whether the rope will bear my body. Or even if my body will bear the rope, because it's cutting into me already. What would the first smash and then crack feel like below? Those rocks, sharp as greedy teeth, are just waiting to pierce my sorry carcass.

The circling sky makes me dizzy and I'm lost in a vortex of dandelion seeds, hundreds of them, wheeling in the hot air. The fluorescent rape-fields ripple in the haze and the sickening honey smell overwhelms me. The heat turns up the volume and the air is suddenly full of singing blackbirds, drilling woodpeckers, metallic panicking grouse, cuckoos announcing summer and wood pigeons cooing 'it's easy, it's easy'. Trees susurrate, bees buzz, dogs bark, and sheep complain. It's too much so I shut my eyes, push my fingers into my ears and start humming to block out nature's cacophony.

I don't know how long I've hung here but there's a cold breeze and the sweat chills on my back, making me shiver. The little hairs stand up all over my body and the sky darkens. From nowhere, hailstones start spattering my head, echoing through hollow white space. They're not hard enough to crack my skull but just to pebbledash me back to my senses. I start hauling myself up the rope, up the rock-face and away from myself. Yeah, avoidance is definitely the best way.

The nights are the worst, that's when shellshock, that old alarm clock, breaks into my sleep. The flashbacks never end, and there's always something burning in the back of my mind. That's usually the first sign that the lightning show's about to start. It leaves the sky and forks down my piano-wire puppet-strings, flashing through neural pathways; a fiery pinball pinging from nerve ending to nerve ending until it hits the jackpot and lights up the cerebral cortex. Finally, it generates enough electricity to countermand the sleep paralysis and drags my corpse to life. It doesn't take much, because my super strong startle response never sleeps. The tiniest sound makes that nerve vibrate and sets the jerky marionette clunking through the night, sleepwalking into action. 'Acting out' they call it, when the body overrides the brain and starts reliving old and terrible memories. You can bomb-blast the mind, but the body has a memory of its own.

So now I sleep in Poppy's room and she shares the big bed with her mother. That way, I can sweat and swear and scream all night long. I've been in there for months now. Laura has always known about my hair-trigger reflexes, and she knows that she should never get within ten feet of my sleeping body without making plenty of noise first. But one night, trying not to wake me, she held her breath and tiptoed into bed. When I came to, she was in a headlock, screaming. She pretends to laugh about it now, but she was scared and so I volunteered to be locked in at night. Maybe I wasn't serious, but she looked at me from behind the blinds of her eyes and I bought the bolts the next day. If only I'd put them on the other side.

It's late now, and here's the nightmare tripping through my mind. The sweat oozes from every pore, making me as slippery as the day I was born. And now I'm sliding down the rock face, except it's not – it's the floor, I know it's only the bedroom floor. But still I can't stop myself from this fast and sudden slide into night. I piss myself, the universe pulses, it takes a

breath and I'm lung-sucked inside. The magnetic north is pulling me, dragging me head first by the iron in my blood. I'm holding to the floor by my fingernails. It's such a steep drop, I'm scared of falling off and now the whirling, twirling, shiny floor is flying. Flying through time and space. I'm spinning so fast that my heart's not strong enough to pump the blood against the dervish gravity. My blood's running backwards and forwards, chasing the dying fumes of oxygen, chasing itself, trying to force its way back through weakened valves, pooling in useless places, all in my hands and my feet, and none in my brain and none in my heart.

Oh, and I can see everything from up here now. Millions of dead people, millions of stars, millions of houses, millions of cars, millions of live people all crushing and jostling for light and air and earth, rushing by me as I chase the stars to the end of the universe. It's all dark because they're moving faster than the speed of light, and even the saccadic movement of my eyes can't keep up as I dissolve into the midnight meltdown. There's no oxygen in me, the weight of the world is crushing my chest so I start gulping in air, and now my blood is too bright and fizzing and my heart whirrs, faster and faster, pounding. My brain is buzzing, my head is spinning, the earth is plummeting and splintered planes of this life kaleidoscope away from me.

The sidereal horror-show is all dark, until we hit the end of infinity and, like the tide hitting the shore, we come racing back. There's a sudden roar of luminescence and I'm surrounded by nuclear explosions as stars spiral in their death throes. It's all blinding white as the stars tessellate and become one blinding implosion behind my eyes. Until pop. Then a noiseless, weightless oblivion. I can float and be quiet now. Somewhere, very far away, there's a soft click and a tiny, frightened question.

'Daddy?'

Although I can't hear it right now, the echo will find its way to me much, much later.

With all its might, the shrunken stone of my soul is trying to stop the puppet-strings from jerking my killing hands back into service. But against the screams it's so small and so weak. And what's that dreadful copper smell, like drowning in melted money? I'm all strength and boiling sinew, scare and snare and I can run and fall and shred and tear and the screams are drilling through my head, but my bloodless brain is just letting go. My arms are deep, deep inside, and I'm up to the eyes in shrieks and mush. Razors, teeth and nails tear at me – there's a banshee on my back. I fall, back through crushed and shattered teeth, back through broken, bloody skulls. Back through crying, burning children. Just back and back and back, until I'm lost in frozen, red eternity.

Out of a million, billion, zillion years, your life is but a blink. And it makes no odds if it's a short blink or a long blink, it's still over in no time. That little breath of air and light, it enters for a short time and then it goes out again. And no-one cares, and even if someone does care, it doesn't matter much because their breath of wind will soon be gone too. We're specks of dust in the light. We don't matter, we don't make a bit of difference. And this is how I survive, this is how I keep myself sane. There's a voice shouting.

'This is what I tell myself this is what I tell myself this is what I tell myself.'

I can hear it above all the terrible silence. It doesn't register straight away that it's my voice.

The things they ask us to do, they train our humanity out of us. We learn to override our emotional systems – the tender machinery of our minds shrivels before loud instructions. And because we're instruments of war, they tune us like pianos. My wires sing with my exaggerated reflexes – the ones I should have left in the theatre of war. My body's still on battle time. My mind's in battle mind, I can't switch it off until I decide to throw the big trip switch.

My career has mostly been spent flying high in the night sky, killing by remote control. But sometimes, on ground manoeuvres, close up, I look into a dead child's eyes. And it doesn't matter if they're six or twenty-six, they're all children when they die, with their word for mother dusting their lips as the wind leaves them. Then I see my little girl, and her eyes are blue and theirs are nearly always brown, and that's how I keep them apart in my mind. But it's only a few twists of DNA or something, a turn of fate that means it's them and not her, my Poppy. And like the trained predator I am, those invisible shark-skin eyelids slide into place, and veil my vulnerable eyes from seeing any more.

War is too much for any of us to bear. We're not built for the horror of it, we don't want to think about it, we don't want to remember it. And we hope the infernos of history will devour the dead and keep us from hearing their names. But at night, the whispering starts, and they say their names to me. Quietly, and one by one. They say them, again and again. They never tire of saying them and I can't stop hearing them. I know them all by heart. And now there's one more. Poppy.