

RACHELLE ATALLA

Thirsty Animals

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Sheep, like people, are ungovernable when hungry.
John Muir

SPRING

I

It was just before 8 p.m. when we pulled into the Welcome Break service station. Mum came to a stop near the entrance, letting the engine idle, an obvious rattle under the frame of the Defender that neither of us felt the need to mention. Outside, a man was sitting on a stool between two parked cars, cooking on a disposable barbecue, while a woman squatted beside him, scrubbing clothes in a small basin.

They're not staying here, are they? Mum asked, nodding towards them. Surely they're not sleeping in the car park . . .

Unclipping my seatbelt, I noticed a squashed insect on the passenger window. On closer inspection it looked like a mosquito – its legs spread out, a diluted smudge of someone else's blood. Had we always had mosquitoes in Scotland, or had they migrated with the warmer climate? I had no idea, but it worried me. There was something in my blood mosquitoes couldn't get enough of.

Aida, Mum pressed. Will these people give you trouble during the night?

I shook my head, opening the passenger door. They usually get moved on after a couple of hours, I said.

She looked at me then, went to say something before changing her mind.

I'll see you in the morning, I said.

I'll be here. Don't be late.

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I nodded, slamming the door shut, mortified that at the age of twenty-one I was struggling to master the skill of driving and still had to rely upon her for getting me to and from work.

As I walked away, dirty water from the woman's basin spilled over, running in a zigzagging line across the tarmac towards me. I could feel this stranger's gaze, a penetrating stare, but I held strong and refused to make eye contact. The stragglers always wanted to talk, tell you their woes and struggles of making it across the border. There used to be hundreds of them, maybe thousands, but they'd dwindled in number, only handfuls at a time now.

The double doors to the service station opened and closed with a whoosh behind me. I passed the different kiosks in the food court and made my way to the staff room, placing my bag in a locker and pinning my name badge to my shirt.

Aaron, my shift partner, was already waiting for me in our concession. He smiled as I settled in beside him – his face familiar and beautiful. He didn't know how beautiful he was.

Thought I'd see you at Joe's last night, he said.

Was there something at Joe's? I wasn't aware . . .

His face reddened. Sorry, I . . .

It's okay, I said. It's not your job to keep my social life afloat.

Above our heads there was a television suspended from a metal frame. The local news was on, and a reporter was speaking to an engineer wearing a hard hat. They were discussing the increased numbers of desalination plants being built across the country to counteract the water shortages. The man in the hard hat was trying to be positive about their progress but the reporter was quizzing him on the cost and timescale. It sounded bizarre to me, gathering up the sea and removing its salt – how was that even possible? They cut back to someone in the studio who had been wheeled out to represent an opposing opinion. It was a dumpy wee man that was talking now, sweating at the temples,

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moaning about the unnecessary money coming from the taxpayer's pocket. I'd seen his type before, usually called Nigel or Clive, mid-sixties, consumed with economic growth and GDPs – the ones who took videos of water running from their own taps just to prove there weren't any shortages. Nigel would no doubt be mortgage-free with an immaculate garden that he was no longer allowed to water, or own a black Mercedes that was really letting him down now he couldn't get it washed by some twelve-year-old for £5. He probably had a rental property too that was sitting empty. The Met Office had said we'd had the driest five-year period since records began, but for Nigel the drought was one big fucking inconvenience. And as he carried on speaking I imagined him running out of water first; savoured the image of his shock.

People are saying that they might close the border, Aaron said, nodding out towards the corridor, as if the border to England were right there and not seven miles south. Not let anyone over at all, he added. Not even the folk with visas.

Who's saying that?

He shrugged. People on Twitter.

Can we watch something else? I said.

He reached up and changed the channel, settling on a repeat of a cheap reality-TV programme about people who worked on luxury yachts.

We used to watch this when we were hungover, he said. Do you remember?

I nodded, smiling.

Aaron had been the year above me at school but when his dad had taken ill, he'd had to defer his place at university, and then we'd both ended up studying in Edinburgh at the same time, him architecture and me English literature. We'd developed something of a friendship which involved us occasionally

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sleeping together and, like an unspoken rule, this arrangement only existed in Edinburgh. Now, because of the drought, we were stuck together once again, two to three night shifts a week depending on the rota.

Do you think they *will* close the border? I finally asked.

He paused. Maybe . . . I mean, if the government decide too many folk are crossing over, then why wouldn't they?

Out in the corridor I could see a boy eyeing up the doughnut stand. Lewis, the manager, had fitted a lock to the cabinet a few weeks ago because doughnut-looting had become a problem. But now we were never very sure who was meant to have the key. It was awkward more than anything, especially in the middle of the night, when a customer asked for a doughnut and you had to do the rounds, locating a key from someone who was usually on a break, while acting as if it was the most natural thing in the world to want a doughnut at 4 a.m. And I was never here when the doughnuts got delivered so I half-suspected that it was the same stale ones that sat in the cabinet day after day, saved from decay only by their obscene sugar content.

If they do close the border, Aaron said, then they'll likely close this place too. And the outlet shops.

A laugh snorted out of me. Not exactly a tragedy, though, is it?

My mum and sister are both working at the Mountain Warehouse.

I fell silent then. Sorry, yeah, it's just, you know . . .

No, I know. They're awful. Total shit.

I placed my elbows on the shelf I was standing in front of, dislodging the plastic strip that displayed the price of chocolate bars. The strip fell to my feet, and I bent to retrieve it. The clip-pings to secure it back into place kept buckling in my hands and eventually I dropped it again, kicking it under the stand. Half the

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shelves were empty because of supply issues anyway. So really, what did it matter?

When I turned, the teenager from the doughnut cabinet and a man, perhaps his dad, were hovering by the drinks aisle. They were debating something in whispers, picking up one bottle at a time before putting it back and lifting another. They made their way to the tills, and I greeted them, offering them my most hospitable smile because it was still early enough in the night that I felt as though it mattered.

The man placed one half-litre bottle of still spring water and a large bag of crisps on the counter, while the boy retreated to the doughnut stand.

I scanned the crisps through first. £1.19. But it took me a moment to remove the security tag from the bottle of water. Eventually, after I'd fought with the tag, the item rang through at £14.99.

That'll be £16.18 total, I said.

The man stared at me before pulling out a wallet from his back pocket. Happy to exploit the desperate, I see.

Sorry but I don't set the prices.

He began rummaging through the folds of his wallet. I think I've only got my card, is that okay?

The card machines are down at the moment, I said. They've been down for a while. But there's a cashpoint outside if you need it. It does charge, though, I added, still smiling.

The man's shoulders slumped, and he glanced at the boy. Of course, he said. I'll be back in a minute.

Aaron waited until they were out of view. No way he's coming back . . .

But the man and boy did return. They paid their money and as the man slid his wallet back into his pocket the boy cracked open the seal of the water. He gulped mouthfuls in front of us, his jugular moving, all jagged and repetitive.

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Are you just passing through? I said, surprising myself for even asking.

The man looked up, holding my eye for longer than seemed natural. My wife has relatives near Fife, and they sponsored our visas.

Have you visited before?

He shook his head, perhaps embarrassed, his eyes shifting momentarily to the floor. And I wanted to laugh: the number of people making it across the border who had never thought to venture into Scotland before.

Are you a golf fan? Aaron asked.

The man stared at us blankly. Sorry?

Golf, Aaron pressed, completely straight-faced. St Andrews, in Fife, is the home of golf.

Oh, the man replied, I never thought to bring my clubs . . . It was as if he was in a fog, disorientated not only by us but by the environment we inhabited. He stared at me, his lips parted. You still have running water, yes?

I nodded.

He licked his lips. I was told that Loch Ness . . . it has more water than all the lakes in England and Wales combined. Is that true?

This wasn't the first time I'd been asked this. It was like some rumour, an urban legend spreading between those making their way north – maybe it gave people hope. But it was weird. And always Loch Ness. I had seen a piece of art somewhere that highlighted the loch's depth – deep crevices making their way to the centre of the earth. I tried to visualise the empty and exposed space; it all seemed so unnatural and disturbing. But, if Loch Ness was to be everyone's saviour, then I was yet to see it come to fruition. The treatment of water, logistics and distribution – those were the terms thrown at us in the government

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briefings. It had barely rained here in over a year, but this man was looking at me so earnestly, and it felt as if he really needed this, so I nodded and said, Yeah, it's true. It actually has nearly *double* the volume of water of all the lakes in England and Wales combined.

We watched them walk away, the boy once again gulping at the water. Slow down, Jamie, the man said. Save some for the rest of us.

Aaron came round to where I was standing and placed his elbows on the counter, cupping his chin in his hands. How long until he realises we're charging double the going rate for a bottle of spring water?

I laughed but it was half-hearted.

Aaron straightened, something solidifying in his voice. Every time I go into the stock room there seems to be less and less. If they close the land border, how will they get goods in? Will they still let things come by boat, even if they won't let people?

How the fuck should I know? I said. I'm not the border police. I've no idea how these things work.

Have you been seeing all the stuff on social media about what it's like south of the border? Proper Third World shit . . .

I'm trying not to look, I said. My socials are already a mix of the horrific versus perfectly poised selfies.

How can you not look? he said. I can't seem to switch it off.

The internet on the farm is chronic, I said. And anyway, terrible things have always been happening to people. We just never really wanted to look at them until now.

It was never so close to home until now, he said.

The next few monotonous hours were filled with some straight-to-TV movie Aaron had picked, while the hum of the fridges and the occasional customer's voice echoed out from the corridor.

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After scrolling through my socials for a while, I took to reading magazines off the rack.

Don't you have coursework to be doing? Aaron asked.

What's the likely chance that I'll be graduating this year? That any of us will . . .

What, so you've stopped even trying?

I don't see you out with your pens and tracing paper, marking up some building, I said. Where's those pretentious postcards you used to bring in as inspiration for your sketches and models?

I take your point, he replied, somewhat aggressively.

I shrugged, making my way through an interior design magazine that was several months old, all Christmas table centrepieces and homemade wreaths. I paused, placing my fingers over the happy faces of those sitting around a festive table, a false family. Christmas on the farm was not usually a particularly joyous day: Great-uncle Bobby would be trying too hard, shattered from tending to the livestock, his partner Sam passive-aggressively preparing the food, grumbling about not getting enough help yet simultaneously demanding we vacate his vicinity. And then there would be Mum, hating every minute. Bobby had bought her one of those SAD sunlamps the year before deciding her problem was down to a lack of vitamin D – that her Egyptian DNA wasn't cut out for Scottish winters despite her having lived here for over two decades.

I closed the magazine. I might nip to the loo, I said, rising from the stool I'd been sitting on, pins and needles suddenly shooting through my feet.

Aaron nodded absently, not bothering to glance up from his phone. Have you seen this video? he said, holding up the screen. It's pretty fucked up. Some guy was killed swimming in a dam. They're saying he was thirsty and jumped in since the water

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wasn't too deep, but he got sucked down by the turbines and never surfaced again. The whole thing's been filmed.

The fluorescent lights shone brightly in the toilets, and an electronic screen that asked you about your customer experience was still flashing – a smiley emoji for complete satisfaction. I had a strong desire to wash my face, but they'd closed off the taps to stop people who were only coming in to fill up their water bottles. The antiseptic hand gel screwed to the wall bubbled away instead.

The drought had been threatening us since last summer, but it had still seemed to take us by surprise – a once-in-a-thousand-years sort of thing, they kept saying. I'd gone on climate marches, attended rallies, but the jet streams were still threatening to collapse, moving as far north as Iceland, leaving the majority of Europe in a situation it had never really experienced before. We'd had our mildest, driest winter, with almost no rainfall, and now it was Easter – summer would soon be approaching, and we had no idea when rain might arrive. With nothing growing, Bobby was constantly wondering how we'd continue to feed our livestock, having resorted to paying extortionate rates for hay imported from Norway. And it didn't help that we were a salary down, the community hospital where Mum had been employed as a midwife having closed its doors.

There must have been warning signs long before last year – maybe the explosion of dandelions taking over verges, or the lack of badgers and moles for Bobby to contend with compared to other years. And now a country with a population of sixty-odd million had essentially run dry and was attempting mass migration into a population with one-tenth its numbers, curbed by little more than a physical border, controlled by the military, while

patrols monitored our choppy waters, turning the boats back that hadn't already capsized.

I brought my blood glucose meter out from its wallet and pricked my finger. I had toyed with getting one of those continuous glucose monitors that were embedded in your skin but the supply of them had become so unreliable, plus I would have had to go on a course, and I couldn't really be bothered. While I waited for the meter to calibrate, I checked my phone again. There were two messages – one was from Mia working at the Premier Inn around the corner, claiming that some weirdo had left a shit in one of the beds. The other was from Dad, asking if I had any plans to visit him in Glasgow. Ignoring both, I took out my short-acting insulin pen, set the dial to six units and lifted my shirt, injecting myself in the stomach. After, I just kind of stood there, not really needing the toilet but not really wanting to go back. I thought about everyone trying their best to use as little water as possible, growing dehydrated and straining to remove urine from their bladders, toilets everywhere neglected and underused – and stupidly this made me feel sad, as if they had their own feelings. To be honest, I was surprised that the toilets here were still running in the service station, or that they hadn't started charging people for the privilege. Instead they were running a chemical through the cisterns that made the water flush blue, stopping people from drinking it. Bizarre to think that, until they went out of their way to add a chemical, the water had been otherwise drinkable. You couldn't flush it right now, though: the mains water was turned off everywhere between 9 p.m. and 7 a.m.

All the doors to the toilet cubicles were swung shut on their hinges and I pressed the door closest to me. A shriek escaped from me as I jumped back, startled by the sight of a woman. She was perched on the closed toilet seat, feet off the

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floor, her knees raised so they were touching her chin. She was filthy, and the stench of her was suddenly overpowering. For a moment I was confused, as if I was misunderstanding a perfectly reasonable and rational situation. She brought her index finger to her lips and when she spoke, in a hushed tone, it was in a language I did not understand. Instinctively I backed away, my hipbone bumping painfully into a basin. She rose, one shoeless foot accidentally pressing down on the pedal of the sanitary bin, so the lid flapped wide open like a set of lips. She was speaking again, an urgency to her voice, but still I couldn't understand her. And then I saw that her wrist was bleeding, droplets landing on the floor, while she pressed the wound to her chest.

I ran out and down the corridor towards our concession. Aaron, I called out, but my voice appeared muted. Aaron . . .

He looked up at me. What is it?

There's a woman . . . In the toilets . . .

And?

I can't understand her. But I think there's something wrong with her. She's bleeding.

I'll get Lewis, he said in an almost inconvenienced tone.

I went back towards the toilets but found myself suddenly stalling, taking reluctant steps. The woman was standing over the threshold of the cubicle, still clutching her arm to her chest.

What happened? I asked, but she looked at me vacantly. I ushered her forward, droplets of blood falling with each step she took until we were out in the open corridor.

Aaron and Lewis were waiting for us.

Who's the first-aider tonight? Lewis asked.

It's meant to be me, I said.

We took her into our concession and ushered her down on to the footstool I had not so long ago been occupying. She

couldn't have been that old, maybe a few years older than me. Lewis left and returned almost instantly with a first-aid box, opening it and handing it to me. I put on a pair of white latex gloves and tore open an antiseptic wipe before trying to pull the woman's arm towards me, but she did everything she could to resist my touch. I placed my hand on her knee, hesitantly, and tried to smile.

We only want to help, I said.

Slowly she offered her arm out towards me and I peeled back the blood-soaked sleeve. Blood began to ooze, almost bubble, the gash deep, and Aaron stepped back, while I tried my best not to gag. I covered her wrist with the antiseptic wipe, but I couldn't imagine it having much effect.

Get me a dressing pack, I said, nodding towards the first-aid box.

Crouching down, Lewis fumbled through all the different things: gauze, plasters, little scissors. He offered me up a selection and I grabbed this thin padding stuff, forcing it on to the woman's arm before taking a bandage and asking Lewis to rip it from its plastic packaging. I was trying to be careful and meticulous, having previously prided myself on my first-aid skills, but the blood was still seeping through. I kept wrapping the bandage around her arm, tighter and tighter, tucking the fabric in at the top.

Afterwards, I rose from my crouched position and stared at my bloodied handiwork.

Do you think we should call a doctor? I said. She probably needs stiches.

Lewis shook his head. No one will come. She's clearly here illegally . . . If she needs a doctor, she'll have to take herself to one.

What do we do with her, then? Aaron asked.

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Lewis was quiet for a moment. Give her something from the shop, he said. Some food, milk. I'll square it up with your supervisor.

And then what? Aaron said.

Well, she can't stay here, he replied, that's for sure. God only knows how she ended up here in the first place.

Aaron grabbed a packet of crisps and a banana-flavoured milkshake, handing them to the woman, but she didn't seem to know what to do with them. She just continued to stare, her eyes glazed over.

Aaron shrugged. I don't know what she likes . . .

Lewis turned to face me. You should show her the door, he said. Me? Why me?

You're a woman . . . She'll understand better, rather than me or Aaron trying to take her out. We'll scare her. He paused. It should be a woman.

Are you serious? I said.

No one replied.

Slowly I guided her out of our concession, back along the corridor. We continued until we reached the front entrance, and I pulled open one of the double doors, ushering her forward with me until we were over the threshold and staring out at the near-deserted car park.

A dilapidated picnic bench was in my sight, and I pointed to it. You can't stay here, I said too loudly. You need to find somewhere else to go.

She continued to stare, her eyes burning into me.

I gave a firm nod, pointing again at the picnic bench before retreating and closing the doors over, all the while checking that she wasn't attempting to follow me back inside.

The cleaner took care of the mess that was left in the toilets, and then she arrived at our concession with her mop. I suddenly

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felt very weak and lethargic. I fumbled for my blood glucose meter again, pricking my finger and shaking as a droplet of my blood landed on the test strip.

Are you okay? Aaron asked.

I was still trembling, but I nodded, inserting the test strip into the reader.

You need to look after yourself, he said, and I stared up at him, irritated, as if he thought he was telling me something I didn't already know. It hadn't been him who had been injecting his body several times a day since the age of five.

As suspected, my blood sugar was low, and I forced a dextrose tablet out from its packet and into my mouth. There were beads of sweat on my forehead but within minutes I was feeling better, more like myself, and, although he didn't say anything, I knew Aaron was relieved too.

The last four hours of our shift passed silently but by the time we were doing handover things felt more jovial, Aaron telling me about some expensive coffee he'd tried in Bali the summer before, where a cat-like creature eats the beans, shits them out and then you drink them. We were laughing as he spoke, really considering the process, but I was also wondering if I'd ever get the chance to see Bali, or if things like that were behind us now. I'd spent my last free summer in the Berkshires of Massachusetts, working for minimum wage as a counsellor at a rich kids' summer camp, while my ankles weeped from mosquito bites.

As we headed out into the foyer Aaron offered me a lift, knowing fine well that Mum would already be waiting for me outside.

How's the driving lessons coming along? he said.

They're not.

He headed right, for the toilets, and I turned left for the double doors. Casually, as I walked out, I glanced at the picnic tables,

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only to see the woman with the bleeding arm still sitting there, the crisps and milkshake appearing untouched.

I approached the Defender, quickening my pace, and climbed in, the woman watching me the whole time.

How was your shift? Mum asked.

The Defender was warm. The dead mosquito was still stuck to the window and I just stared at it, paralysed.

Is something wrong? Mum said.

I turned to look at her. She was wearing one of Dad's old waxed Barbour jackets.

I hate that jacket, I said. Smells like wet dog.

Stop that, she said firmly.

And we settled into our well-practised routine of silence then, until we arrived back at the farm, the reservoir that fed most of the villages and beyond to our left, parts of its banks exposed. The hills and browned grass were to our right, while the morning sun shone through the windscreen, the heat of the day already upon us.