

The Men Writers Association
New Bevand Square

27th October

Dear Naomi,

I've finished the bloody book. I'm sending it to you, with all its fragments and drawings, in the hope that you'll give me some guidance or at least that I'll finally hear the echo of it as I drop the pebble of this book down the well.

You'll ask me first of all what it *is*. 'Not another dry volume of history' was what I promised. Four books in I realize that no general reader can be bothered to wade through endless mounds of evidence, no one cares about the technicalities of dating finds and strata comparison. I've seen audiences' eyes go blank as I try to explain my research. So what I've done here is a sort of hybrid piece, something that I hope will appeal more to ordinary people. Not quite history, not quite a novel. A sort of 'novelization' of what archaeologists agree is the most plausible narrative. I've included some illustrations of archaeological finds that I hope are suggestive, but readers can – and I'm sure many will! – skip over them.

I have questions for you. Is it very shocking? Too hard to accept that anything of this sort could ever have been the case, no matter how far back in our history? Is there anything I can do to make it all *seem* more plausible? You know what they say about 'truth' and 'the appearance of truth' being opposites.

I've put in some terrifically troubling stuff about Mother Eve . . . but we all know how these things work! Surely no one will be too distressed . . . everyone claims to be an atheist now, anyway. And all the 'miracles' really *are* explicable.

Anyway, sorry, I'll shut up now. I don't want to influence you, just read it and tell me what you think. I hope your own

book's going well. I can't wait to read it, when it's ready to be seen. Thank you *so much* for this. I am so grateful you could spare the time.

Much love,
Neil

Nonesuch House
Lakevik

Dearest Neil,

Wow! What a treat! I've been flicking through the pages and can't wait to dive in. I see you've included some scenes with male soldiers, male police officers and 'boy crime gangs', just as you said you would, you saucy boy! I don't have to tell *you* how much I enjoy that sort of thing. I'm sure you remember. I'm practically on the edge of my seat.

I'm very intrigued to see what you've done with the premise. It'll be a welcome relief from my own book, if I'm honest. Selim says if the new one's not a masterpiece, he's leaving me for some woman who *can* write. I don't think he has any idea how these offhand remarks make me feel.

Anyway! Looking forward to this! I think I'd rather enjoy this 'world run by men' you've been talking about. Surely a kinder, more caring and – dare I say it? – more *sexy* world than the one we live in.

More soon, my dear!

Naomi

The Power

A historical novel

NEIL ADAM ARMON

The shape of power is always the same; it is the shape of a tree. Root to tip, central trunk branching and re-branching, spreading wider in ever-thinner, searching fingers. The shape of power is the outline of a living thing straining outward, sending its fine tendrils a little further, and a little further yet.

This is the shape of rivers leading to the ocean – the trickles to rivulets, the rivulets to streams, the streams to torrents, the great power gathering and gushing, becoming mightier to hurl itself into the great marine might.

It is the shape that lightning forms when it strikes from heaven to earth. The forked tear in the sky becomes a pattern on flesh or on the earth. These same distinctive patterns bloom in a block of acrylic when struck with electricity. We send electric currents down orderly runs of circuits and switches, but the shape that electricity wants to take is of a living thing, a fern, a bare branch. The strike point in the centre, the power seeking outward.

This same shape grows within us, our inward trees of nerves and blood vessels. The central trunk, the pathways dividing and re-dividing. The signals carried from our fingers' ends to the spine to the brain. We are electrical. The power travels within us as it does in nature. My children, nothing has happened here that has not been in accordance with the natural law.

Power travels in the same manner between people; it must be so. People form villages, villages become towns, towns bow the knee to cities and cities to states. Orders travel from the centre to the tips. Results travel from the tips to the centre. The communication is constant. Oceans cannot survive without trickles, nor steadfast tree trunks without budlets, nor the enthroned brain without nerve endings. As above, so below. As on the outskirts, so at the very heart.

It follows that there are two ways for the nature and use of human power to change. One is that an order might issue from the palace, a command unto the people saying 'It is thus.' But the other, the more certain, the more inevitable, is that those thousand thousand points of light should each send a new message. When the people change, the palace cannot hold.

As it is written: 'She cuppeth the lightning in her hand. She commandeth it to strike.'

from the Book of Eve, 13-17

Ten years to go

Roxy

The men lock Roxy in the cupboard when they do it. What they don't know is: she's been locked in that cupboard before. When she's naughty, her mum puts her there. Just for a few minutes. Till she calms down. Slowly, over the hours in there, she's worked the lock loose with a fingernail or a paperclip in the screws. She could have taken that lock off any time she wanted. But she didn't, because then her mum would have put a bolt on the outside. It's enough for her to know, sitting in there in the dark, that if she really wanted to she could get out. The knowledge is as good as freedom.

So that's why they think they've locked her in, safe and sound. But she still gets out. That's how she sees it.

The men come at nine thirty in the evening. Roxy was supposed to have gone over to her cousins that night; it had been arranged for weeks, but she'd given her mum lip about not getting her the right tights from Primark, so her mum said, 'You're not going, you're staying in.' Like Roxy cared about going to her poxy cousins, anyway.

When the blokes kick in the door and see her there, sulking on the sofa next to her mum, one of them goes, 'Fuck, the girl's here.' There are two men, one taller with a face like a rat, the other shorter, square-jawed. She doesn't know them.

The short one grabs her mum by the throat; the tall one chases Roxy through the kitchen. She's almost out the back door when he grabs her thigh; she falls forward and he's got her by the waist. She's kicking and shouting, 'Fuck off, let me go!' and when he puts a hand over her mouth she bites him so hard she tastes blood. He swears, but he doesn't drop her. He carries her through the living room. The short one's pushed her mum up against the fireplace. Roxy feels it start to build in her then, though she doesn't know what it is. It's just a feeling at her fingers' ends, a prickle in her thumbs.

She starts screaming. Her mum's going, 'Don't you hurt my Roxy, don't you fucking hurt her, you don't know what you're into, this is gonna come down on you like fire, you're gonna wish you was never born. Her dad's Bernie Monke, for Christ's sake.'

The short one laughs. 'We're here with a message for her dad, as it goes.'

The tall one bundles Roxy into the cupboard under the stairs so fast she doesn't know it's happening until the dark is around her, and the dusty-sweet smell of the Hoover. Her mum starts screaming.

Roxy's breathing fast. She's frightened, but she's got to get to her mum. She turns one of the screws on the lock with her fingernail. There's one, two, three twists, and it's out. A spark jumps between the metal of the screw and her hand. Static electricity. She's feeling weird. Focused, like she can see with her eyes closed. Bottom screw, one, two, three twists. Her mum's saying, 'Please. Please don't. Please. What is this? She's just a kid. She's just a child, for God's sake.'

One of the men laughs low. 'Didn't look much like a kid to me.'

Her mum shrieks then; it sounds like metal in a bad engine.

Roxy tries to work out where the men are in the room. One's with her mum. The other . . . she hears a sound to her left. Her plan is: she'll come out low, get the tall one in the back of the knees, stomp his head, then it's two against one. If they've got guns, they haven't shown them. Roxy's been in fights before. People say things about her. And her mum. And her dad.

One. Two. Three. Her mum screams again, and Roxy pulls the lock off the door and bashes it open as hard as she can.

She's lucky. She's caught the tall man from behind with the door. He stumbles, he topples, she grabs his right foot as it comes up, and he goes down hard on the carpet. There's a crack, and he's bleeding from the nose.

The short man has a knife pressed against her mum's neck. The blade winks at her, silver and smiling.

Her mum's eyes go wide. 'Run, Roxy,' she says, not more than a whisper, but Roxy hears it like it was inside her head: 'Run. Run.'

Roxy doesn't run from fights at school. If you do that, they'll

never stop saying, 'Your mum's a slapper and your dad's a crook. Watch out, Roxy'll nick your book.' You've got to stomp them till they beg. You don't run.

Something's happening. The blood is pounding in her ears. A prickling feeling is spreading along her back, over her shoulders, along her collarbone. It's saying: you can do it. It's saying: you're strong.

She jumps over the prone man, groaning and pawing at his face. She's going to grab her mum's hand and get out of here. They just need to be on the street. This can't happen out there, in the middle of the day. They'll find her dad; he'll sort it out. It's only a few steps. They can do it.

Short man kicks Roxy's mum hard in the stomach. She doubles over in pain, falls to her knees. He swishes the knife at Roxy.

Tall man groans. 'Tony. Remember. Not the girl.'

Short man kicks the other in the face. Once. Twice. Three times. 'Don't. Say. My fucking name.'

Tall man goes quiet. His face bubbles with blood. Roxy knows she's in trouble now. Her mum's shouting, 'Run! Run!' Roxy feels the thing like pins and needles along her arms. Like needle-pricks of light from her spine to her collarbone, from her throat to her elbows, wrists, to the pads of her fingers. She's glittering, inside.

He reaches for her with one hand, the knife in the other. She gets ready to kick him or punch him but some instinct tells her a new thing. She grabs his wrist. She *twists* something quite deep inside her chest, as if she'd always known how to do it. He tries to wriggle out of her grip, but it's too late.

She cuppeth the lightning in her hand. She commandeth it to strike.

There's a crackling flash and a sound like a paper snapper. She can smell something a bit like a rainstorm and a bit like burning hair. The taste welling under her tongue is of bitter oranges. The short man is on the floor now. He's making a crooning, wordless cry. His hand is clenching and unclenching. There's a long, red scar running up his arm from his wrist. She can see it even under the blond hairs: it's scarlet, patterned like a fern, leaves and tendrils,

budlets and branches. Her mum's mouth is open, she's staring, her tears are still falling.

Roxy tugs at her mum's arm, but she's shocked and slow and her mouth is still saying, 'Run! Run!' Roxy doesn't know what she's done, but she knows when you're fighting someone stronger than you and they're down, you get out. But her mum doesn't move quickly enough. Before Roxy can get her up the short man is saying, 'Oh no, you don't.'

He's wary, pulling himself to his feet, limping between them and the door. His one hand hangs dead by his side, but the other's holding that knife. Roxy remembers what it felt like to do the thing, whatever it was she did. She pulls her mum behind her.

'Whatcha got there, girlie?' says the man. Tony. She'll remember his name to tell her dad. 'Got a battery?'

'Get out the way,' says Roxy. 'You want another taste?'

Tony steps back a couple of paces. Eyes her arms. Looks to see if she's got anything behind her back. 'You dropped it, dintcha, little girl?'

She remembers the way it felt. The twist, the explosion outward.

She takes a step towards Tony. He stands his ground. She takes another step. He looks to his dead hand. The fingers are still twitching. He shakes his head. 'You ain't got nothing.'

He motions towards her with the knife. She reaches out, touches the back of his good hand. Does that same *twist*.

Nothing happens.

He starts to laugh. Holds the knife in his teeth. Grabs her two wrists in his one hand.

She tries it again. Nothing. He forces her to her knees.

'Please,' says her mum, quite softly. 'Please. Please don't.'

And then something hits her on the back of the head and she's gone.

When she wakes, the world is sideways. There's the hearth, just like always. Wooden trim around the fireplace. It's pushing into her eye, and her head hurts and her mouth is mushed up into the carpet. There's the taste of blood on her teeth. Something is dripping.

She closes her eyes. Opens them again and knows it's been longer than a few minutes. The street outside is quiet. The house is cold. And lopsided. She feels out her body. Her legs are up on a chair. Her face is hanging down, pressed into the carpet and the fireplace. She tries to lever herself up, but it's too much effort, so she wriggles and lets her legs drop to the floor. It hurts when she falls, but at least she's all on one level.

Memory comes back to her in quick flashes. The pain, then the source of the pain, then that thing she did. Then her mum. She pushes herself up slowly, noticing as she does so that her hands are sticky. And something is dripping. The carpet is sodden, thick with a red stain in a wide circle around the fireplace. There's her mum, her head lolling over the arm of the sofa. And there's a paper resting on her chest, with a felt-tip drawing of a primrose.

Roxy is fourteen. She's one of the youngest, and one of the first.

Tunde

Tunde is doing laps in the pool, splashing more than he needs so Enuma will notice him trying not to show that he wants to be noticed. She is flipping through *Today's Woman*; she flicks her eyes back to the magazine every time he looks up, pretending to be intent on reading about Toke Makinwa and her surprise winter-wedding broadcast on her YouTube channel. He can tell Enuma is watching him. He thinks she can tell that he can tell. It is exciting.

Tunde is twenty-one, just out of that period of his life where everything seemed the wrong size, too long or too short, pointing in the wrong direction, unwieldy. Enuma is four years younger but more of a woman than he is a man, demure but not ignorant. Not too shy, either, not in the way she walks or the quick smile that darts across her face when she understands a joke a moment before everyone else. She's visiting Lagos from Ibadan; she's the cousin of a friend of a boy Tunde knows from his photo-journalism class at college. There's been a gang of them hanging out together over the summer. Tunde spotted her the first day she arrived; her secret smile and her jokes that he didn't at first realize were jokes. And the curve of her hip, and the way she fills her T-shirts, yes. It's been quite a thing to arrange to be alone together with Enuma. Tunde's nothing if not determined.

Enuma said early on in the visit that she had never enjoyed the beach: too much sand, too much wind. Swimming pools are better. Tunde waited one, two, three days, then suggested a trip – we could all drive down to Akodo beach, take a picnic, make a day of it. Enuma said she would prefer not to go. Tunde pretended not to notice. The night before the trip, he started to complain of an upset stomach. It's dangerous to swim with a stomach complaint – the cold water might shock your system. You should stay home, Tunde.

But I'll miss the trip to the beach. You should not be swimming in the sea. Enuma's staying here; she can bring a doctor if you need one.

One of the girls said, 'But you'll be alone together, in this house.'

Tunde wished her to be struck dumb in that very moment. 'My cousins are coming later,' he said.

No one asked which cousins. It had been that kind of hot, lazy summer with people wandering in and out of the big house around the corner from Ikoyi Club.

Enuma acquiesced. Tunde noticed her not protesting. She didn't stroke her friend's back and ask her to stay home from the beach, too. She said nothing when he got up half an hour after the last car left and stretched and said he was feeling much better. She watched him as he jumped from the short springboard into the pool, her quick smile flashing.

He makes a turn under the water. It is neat, his feet barely breaking the surface. He wonders if she saw him do it, but she's not there. He looks around, sees her shapely legs, bare feet padding out of the kitchen. She's carrying a can of Coca Cola.

'Hey,' he says, in a mock-lordly tone. 'Hey, servant girl, bring me that Coke.'

She turns and smiles with wide, limpid eyes. She looks to one side and then the other, and points a finger at her chest as if to say, Who? Me?

God, but he wants her. He doesn't know exactly what to do. There have only been two girls before her and neither of them became 'girlfriends'. At college they joke about him that he's married to his studies, because he's always so single. He doesn't like it. But he's been waiting for someone he really wanted. She has something. He wants what she has.

He plants his palms on the wet tiles and raises himself out of the water and on to the stone in one graceful movement which he knows shows off the muscles of his shoulders, his chest and collarbone. He has a good feeling. This is going to work.

She sits on a lounger. As he stalks towards her, she digs her nails in under the can's tab, as if she's about to open it.

‘Oh no,’ he says, still smiling. ‘You know such things are not for the likes of you.’

She clutches the Coke to her midriff. It must be cold there against her skin. She says, demurely, ‘I just want a little taste.’ She bites her bottom lip.

She must be doing it on purpose. Must be. He is excited. This is going to happen.

He stands over her. ‘Give it to me.’

She holds the can in one hand and rolls it along her neck as if to cool herself. She shakes her head. And then he’s on her.

They play-wrestle. He takes care not to really force her. He’s sure she’s enjoying it as much as he is. Her arm comes up over her head, holding the can, to keep it far away from him. He pushes her arm back a little more, making her gasp and twist backwards. He makes a grab for the can of Coke, and she laughs, low and soft. He likes her laughter.

‘Aha, trying to keep that drink from your lord and master,’ he says. ‘What a wicked servant girl you are.’

And she laughs again and wriggles more. Her breasts push up against the V-neck of her swimming costume. ‘You’ll never have it,’ she says. ‘I will defend it with my very life!’

And he thinks: Clever *and* beautiful, may the Lord have mercy upon my soul. She’s laughing, and he’s laughing. He leans his body weight into her; she’s warm underneath him.

‘Do you think you can keep it from me?’ He lunges again, and she twists to escape him. He makes a grab at her waist.

She puts her hand to his.

There’s the scent of orange blossom. A wind gusts up and hurls a few white handfuls of blooms into the swimming pool.

There is a feeling in his hand as if some insect has stung him. He looks down to swat it away, and the only thing on his hand is her warm palm.

The sensation grows, steadily and swiftly. At first it is pinpricks in his hand and forearm, then a swarm of buzzing prickles, then it is pain. He is breathing too quickly to be able to make a sound. He cannot move his left arm. His heart is loud in his ears. His chest is tight.

She is still giggling, soft and low. She leans forward and pulls him closer to her. She looks into his eyes, her irises are lined with lights of brown and gold, and her lower lip is moist. He is afraid. He is excited. He realizes that he could not stop her, whatever she wanted to do now. The thought is terrifying. The thought is electrifying. He is achingly hard now, and does not know when that happened. He cannot feel anything at all in his left arm.

She leans in, bubblegum breath, and kisses him softly on the lips. Then she peels away, runs to the pool and dives, in one smooth, practised movement.

He waits for the feeling to come back to his arm. She does her laps in silence, not calling to him or splashing water at him. He feels excited. He feels ashamed. He wants to talk to her, but he is afraid. Maybe he imagined it all. Maybe she will call him a bad name if he asks her what happened.

He walks to the stall on the corner of the street to buy a frozen orange drink so he won't have to say anything to her. When the others come back from the beach, he falls in gladly with plans to visit a further cousin the next day. He wants very much to be distracted and not to be alone. He does not know what happened, nor is there anyone he could discuss it with. When he imagines asking his friend Charles about it, or Isaac, his throat clamps shut. If he said what happened, they would think he was crazy, or weak, or lying. He thinks of the way she laughed at him.

He finds himself searching her face for signs of what happened. What was it? Did she mean to do it? Had she planned, specifically, to hurt or scare him, or was it just an accident, involuntary? Did she even know she'd done it? Or was it not her at all but some lustful malfunction of his own body? The whole thing chews at him. She gives no sign that anything happened. By the last day of the trip she's holding hands with another boy.

There is a shame like rust working its way through his body. He thinks over that afternoon compulsively. In bed at night: her lips, her breasts pressing against the smooth fabric, the outline of her nipples, his absolute vulnerability, the feeling that she could overpower him if she wanted. The thought of it excites him, and he

touches himself. He tells himself he is excited by the memory of her body, the smell of her like hibiscus flowers, but he cannot know for certain. The things are tangled together now in his mind: lust and power, desire and fear.

Perhaps it is because he has played the tape of that afternoon over so often in his mind, because he has longed for some forensic evidence, a photograph, or a video, or a sound recording, perhaps that is the reason that he thinks of reaching for his phone first, in the supermarket. Or perhaps some of the things they have been trying to teach them in college – about citizen journalism, about the ‘nose for the story’ – have been sinking in.

He is in Goodies with his friend Isaac a few months after that day with Enuma. They are in the fruit aisle, inhaling the sweet fug of ripe guava, drawn to them from across the store like the tiny flies that settle on the surface of the over-ripe, split-open fruit. Tunde and Isaac are arguing about girls, and what girls like. Tunde is trying to keep his shame buried very far down in his body so his friend will not be able to guess that he has secret knowledge. And then a girl shopping alone gets into an argument with a man. He might be thirty; she is perhaps fifteen or sixteen.

He has been sweet-talking her; Tunde thought at first that the two knew each other. He only realizes his mistake when she says: ‘Get away from me.’ The man smiles easily and takes a pace towards her. ‘A pretty girl like you deserves a compliment.’

She leans over, looks down, breathes heavily. She clasps her fingers around the edge of a wooden crate full of mangos. There is a feeling; it prickles the skin. Tunde takes his phone from his pocket, flips on the video. Something is going to happen here that is the same as the thing that happened to him. He wants to own it, to be able to take it home and watch it again and again. He’s been thinking about this since the day with Enuma, hoping that something like this might happen.

The man says, ‘Hey, don’t turn away from me. Give me a little smile.’

She swallows hard and keeps looking down.

The scents in the supermarket become more intense; Tunde can

detect in a single inhalation the individual fragrances of the apples and the bell peppers and the sweet oranges.

Isaac whispers, 'I think she is going to hit him with a mango.'

Canst thou direct the lightning bolts? Or do they say to thee: 'Here we are'?

Tunde is recording when she turns around. The screen of his phone fuzzes for a moment when she strikes. Other than that, he gets the whole thing very clearly. There she is, bringing her hand to his arm while he smiles and thinks she is performing mock-fury for his amusement. If you pause the video for a moment at this point, you can see the charge jump. There's the trace of a Lichtenberg figure, swirling and branching like a river along his skin up from wrist to elbow as the capillaries burst.

Tunde follows him with the camera's eye as he falls to the ground, fitting and choking. He swivels to keep her in frame as she runs from the market. There's the noise in the background of people calling for help, saying a girl has poisoned a man. Hit him and poisoned him. Struck him with a needle full of poison. Or, no, there is a snake among the fruit, a viper or puff adder concealed in the piled fruit. And someone says, '*Aje ni girl yen, sha!* That girl was a witch! That is how a witch kills a man.'

Tunde's camera turns back to the figure on the floor. The man's heels are drumming the linoleum tiles. There is a pink foam at his lips. His eyes have rolled back. His head is thrashing from side to side. Tunde thought that if he could capture it in the bright window of his phone, then he would no longer feel afraid. But looking at the man coughing up red mucus and crying, he feels the fear travel down his spine like a hot wire. He knows then what he felt by the pool: that Enuma could have killed him if she'd wanted. He keeps the camera trained on the man until the ambulance arrives.

It is this video which, when he puts it online, starts the business of the Day of the Girls.

Margot

‘It has to be fake.’

‘Fox News is saying not.’

‘Fox News would say whatever makes the most people tune in to Fox News.’

‘Sure. Still.’

‘What are these lines coming out of her hands?’

‘Electricity.’

‘But that’s just . . . I mean . . .’

‘Yeah.’

‘Where’d it come from?’

‘Nigeria, I think. Went up yesterday.’

‘There are a lot of nut-jobs out there, Daniel. Fakers. Scammers.’

‘There are more videos. Since this one went out, there have been . . . four or five.’

‘Faked. People get excited about these things. It’s a what-they-call-it – a meme. You heard about that thing Slender Man? Some girls tried to kill their friend as a tribute to him. It. Terrible.’

‘It’s four or five videos every *hour*, Margot.’

‘Fuck.’

‘Yup.’

‘Well, what do you want me to do about it?’

‘Close the schools.’

‘Can you even *imagine* what I’ll get from the parents? Can you imagine the millions of *voting parents* and what they’ll do if I send all their kids home today?’

‘Can you imagine what you’ll get from the teachers’ unions if one of their membership is injured? Crippled? Killed? Imagine the *liability*.’

‘*Killed?*’

‘Can’t be certain.’

Margot stares down at her hands, clutching the edge of the desk. She's going to look like an idiot, going along with this. It has to be a stunt for a TV show. She'll be the shit-for-brains, the Mayor who closed the schools of this major metropolitan area because of a fucking *practical joke*. But if she doesn't close them and something happens . . . Daniel will get to be the Governor of this great state, who warned the Mayor, who tried to convince her to do something, but all to no avail. She can practically see the tears running down his cheeks as he gives his interview via live feed from the Governor's Mansion. Fuck.

Daniel checks his phone. 'They've announced closures in Iowa and Delaware,' he says.

'Fine.'

'"Fine" meaning?'

'"Fine" meaning "fine". Do it. Fine, I'll close them.'

There are four or five days where she barely goes home. She doesn't remember leaving the office, or driving back, or crawling into bed, although she supposes she must have done these things. The phone doesn't stop. She goes to bed clutching it and wakes up holding it. Bobby has the girls so she doesn't need to think about them and, God forgive her, they don't cross her mind.

This thing has broken out across the world and no one knows what the fuck is going on.

To start with, there were confident faces on the TV, spokespeople from the CDC saying it was a virus, not very severe, most of the people recovered fine, and it just *looked* like young girls were electrocuting people with their hands. We all know that's impossible, right, that's crazy – the news anchors laughed so hard they cracked their makeup. Just for fun, they brought in a couple of marine biologists to talk about electric eels and their body pattern. A guy with a beard, a gal with glasses, aquarium fish in a tank – makes for a solid morning segment. Did you know the guy who invented the battery was inspired by looking at the bodies of electric eels? I did not know that, Tom, that is fascinating. I've heard they can fell a horse. You're kidding, I'd never have imagined it. Apparently, a

lab in Japan powered their Christmas-tree lights from a tank of electric eels. We can't do that with these girls, now, can we? I would think not, Kristen, I would think not. Although doesn't Christmas seem to come earlier every year? And now the weather on the ones.

Margot and the office of the Mayor take it seriously days before the news desks understand that it's real. They're the ones who get the early reports of fighting in the playgrounds. A strange new kind of fighting which leaves boys – mostly boys, sometimes girls – breathless and twitching, with scars like unfurling leaves winding up their arms or legs or across the soft flesh of their middles. Their first thought after disease is a new weapon, something these kids are bringing into school, but as the first week trickles into the second they know that's not it.

They latch on to any crazy theory going, not knowing how to tell the plausible from the ridiculous. Late at night, Margot reads a report from a team in Delhi who are the first to discover the strip of striated muscle across the girls' collarbones which they name the *organ of electricity*, or the *skein* for its twisted strands. At the points of the collar are electro-receptors enabling, they theorize, a form of electric echo-location. The buds of the skein have been observed using MRI scans in the collarbones of newborn infant girls. Margot photocopies this report and has it emailed to every school in the state; for days, it's the only good science in a host of garbled interpretation. Even Daniel's momentarily grateful, before he remembers that he hates her.

An Israeli anthropologist suggests that the development of this organ in humans is proof positive of the aquatic-ape hypothesis; that we are naked of hair because we came from the oceans, not the jungle, where once we terrified the deeps like the electric eel, the electric ray. Preachers and televangelists grab the news and squeeze it, finding in the sticky entrails the unmistakable signs of the impending end of days. A fist fight breaks out on a popular news discussion programme between a scientist who demands that the Electric Girls be investigated surgically and a man of God who believes they are a harbinger of the apocalypse and must not be touched by human hand. There is an argument already about

whether this thing was always latent in the human genome and has been reawoken or whether it is a mutation, a terrible deformity.

Just before sleep, Margot thinks of winged ants and how there would be just one day every summer that the house at the lake would swarm with them, thickly upon the ground, clinging to the timber-clad frame, vibrating on the tree trunks, the air so full of ants you thought you might breathe them in. They live underground, those ants, all year long, entirely alone. They grow from their eggs, they eat what – dust and seeds or something – and they wait, and wait. And one day, when the temperature has been just right for the right number of days and when the moisture is just so . . . they all take to the air at once. To find each other. Margot couldn't tell this kind of thought to anyone else. They'd think she'd gone crazy from the stress and, God knows, there are enough people looking to replace her anyway. Still, she lies in bed after a day of dealing with reports of burned kids and kids with seizures and girl gangs fighting and being taken into custody for their own protection and thinks: Why now? Why right now? And she comes up again and again with those ants, biding their time, waiting for the spring.

Three weeks in, she gets a call from Bobby to say that Jocelyn's been caught fighting.

They'd separated the boys from the girls on the fifth day; it seemed obvious, when they worked out the girls were doing it. Already there are parents telling their boys not to go out alone, not to stray too far. 'Once you've seen it happen,' says a grey-faced woman on TV. 'I saw a girl in the park doing that to a boy for no reason, he was bleeding from the eyes. The *eyes*. Once you've seen that happen, no mom would let her boys out of her sight.'

Things couldn't stay closed forever; they reorganized. Boys-only buses took them safely to boys-only schools. They fell into it easily. You only had to see a few videos online for the fear to hit you in the throat.

But for the girls it has not been so simple. You cannot keep them from each other. Some of them are angry and some of them are mean, and now the thing is out in the open some are vying to prove their strength and skill. There have been injuries and accidents; one

girl has been struck blind by another. The teachers are afraid. Television pundits are saying: 'Lock them all up, maximum security.' It is, as far as anyone can tell, all of the girls of about fifteen years old. As near to all as makes no difference. They can't lock them all up, it makes no sense. Still, people are asking for it.

Now Jocelyn's been caught fighting. The press have it before Margot can make her way home to see her daughter. News trucks are setting up on her front lawn when she arrives. Madam Mayor, would you care to comment on the rumours that your daughter has put a boy in the hospital?

No, she would not care to comment.

Bobby is in the living room with Maddy. She's sitting on the couch between his legs, drinking her milk and watching *Powerpuff Girls*. She looks up as her mother comes in, but doesn't move, flicks her eyes back to the TV set. Ten going on fifteen. OK. Margot kisses the top of Maddy's head, even as Maddy tries to look around her, back to the screen. Bobby squeezes Margot's hand.

'Where's Jos?'

'Upstairs.'

'And?'

'She's as scared as anyone.'

'Yeah.'

Margot closes the door of the bedroom softly.

Jocelyn is on her bed, legs stretched out. She's holding Mr Bear. She's a child, just a child.

'I should have called,' says Margot, 'as soon as it started. I'm sorry.'

Jocelyn's near to tears. Margot sits on the bed gently, as if not to tip her full pail over. 'Dad says you haven't hurt anyone, not badly.'

There's a pause, but Jos doesn't say anything, so Margot just keeps talking. 'There were . . . three other girls? I know they started it. That boy should never have been near you. They've been checked out at John Muir. You just gave the kid a scare.'

'I know.'

All right. Verbal communication. A start.

‘Was that the . . . first time you’ve done it?’

Jocelyn rolls her eyes. She plucks at the comforter with one hand.

‘This is brand new to both of us, OK? How long have you been doing it?’

She mutters so low that Margot can barely hear, ‘Six months.’

‘Six months?’

Mistake. Never express incredulity, never alarm. Jocelyn draws her knees up.

‘I’m sorry,’ says Margot. ‘It’s just . . . it’s a surprise, that’s all.’

Jos frowns. ‘Plenty of girls started it before I did. It was . . . it was kinda funny . . . when it started, like static electricity.’

Static electricity. What was it, you combed your hair and stuck a balloon to it? An activity for bored six-year-olds at birthday parties.

‘It was this funny, crazy thing girls were doing. There were secret videos online. How to do tricks with it.’

It’s this exact moment, yes, when any secret you have from your parents becomes precious. Anything you know that they’ve never heard of.

‘How did you . . . how did you learn to do it?’

Jos says, ‘I don’t know. I just felt I could do it, OK. It’s like a sort of . . . *twist*.’

‘Why didn’t you say anything? Why didn’t you tell me?’

She looks through the window to the lawn. Beyond the high back fence, men and women with cameras are already gathering.

‘I don’t know.’

Margot remembers trying to talk to her own mother about boys or the stuff that happened at parties. About how far was *too far*, where a boy’s hand should stop. She remembers the absolute impossibility of those conversations.

‘Show me.’

Jos narrows her eyes. ‘I can’t . . . I’d hurt you.’

‘Have you been practising? Can you control it well enough so you know you wouldn’t kill me, or give me a fit?’

Jos takes a deep breath. Puffs her cheeks out. Lets the breath out slowly. ‘Yes.’

Her mother nods. This is the girl she knows: conscientious and serious. Still Jos. 'Then show me.'

'I can't control it well enough for it not to hurt, OK?'

'How much will it hurt?'

Jos splay her fingers wide, looks at her palms. 'Mine comes and goes. Sometimes it's strong, sometimes it's nothing.'

Margot presses her lips together. 'OK.'

Jos extends her hand, then pulls it back. 'I don't want to.'

There was a time when every crevice of this child's body was Margot's to clean and care for. It is not OK with her not to know her own child's strength. 'No more secrets. Show me.'

Jos is near to tears. She places her forefinger and her middle finger on her mother's arm. Margot waits to see Jos *do* something; hold her breath, or wrinkle her brow, or show exertion in the muscles of her arm, but there's nothing. Only the pain.

She has read the preliminary reports out of the CDC noting that the power 'particularly affects the pain centres of the human brain', meaning that, while it looks like electrocution, it hurts more than it needs to. It is a targeted pulse which sets up a response in the body's pain receptors. Nonetheless, she'd expected it to look like something; to see her flesh crisping and wrinkling, or to watch the arcing current, quick as a snake's bite.

Instead, she smells the scent of wet leaves after a rainstorm. An apple orchard with the windfalls turning to rot, just as it was on her parents' farm.

And then it hurts. From the place on her forearm where Jos is touching her, it starts as a dull bone-ache. The flu, travelling through the muscles and joints. It deepens. Something is cracking her bone, twisting it, bending it, and she wants to tell Jos to stop but she can't open her mouth. It burrows through the bone like it's splintering apart from the inside; she can't stop herself seeing a tumour, a solid, sticky lump bursting out through the marrow of her arm, splitting the ulna and the radius to sharp fragments. She feels sick. She wants to cry out. The pain radiates across her arm and, nauseatingly, through her body. There's not a part of her it hasn't touched now; she feels it echo in her head and down her

spine, across her back, around her throat and out, spreading across her collarbone.

The collarbone. It has only been a few seconds, but the moments have elongated. Only pain can bring such attention to the body; this is how Margot notices the answering echo in her chest. Among the forests and mountains of pain, a chiming note along her collarbone. Like answering to like.

It reminds her of something. A game she played when she was a girl. How funny: she hasn't thought of that game in years. She never told anyone about it; she knew she mustn't, although she couldn't say how she knew. In the game, she was a witch, and she could make a ball of light in the palm of her hand. Her brothers played that they were spacemen with plastic ray-guns they'd bought with cereal-packet tokens, but the little game she'd played entirely by herself among the beech trees along the rim of their property was different. In her game, she didn't need a gun, or space-helmet, or lightsaber. In the game Margot played when she was a child, she was enough all by herself.

There is a tingling feeling in her chest and arms and hands. Like a dead arm, waking up. The pain is not gone now, but it is irrelevant. Something else is happening. Instinctively, she digs her hands into Jocelyn's patchwork comforter. She smells the scent of the beech trees, as if she were back beneath their woody protection, their musk of old timber and wet loam.

She sendeth her lightning even unto the ends of the earth.

When she opens her eyes, there is a pattern around each of her hands. Concentric circles, light and dark, light and dark, burned into the comforter where her hands clutched it. And she knows, she felt that *twist*, and she remembers that maybe she has always known it and it has always belonged to her. Hers to cup in her hand. Hers to command to strike.

'Oh God,' she says. 'Oh God.'