

LANDFILL
MOUNTAINS



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Advanced Review Copy of:

LANDFILL MOUNTAINS

BY RAB FERGUSON



ONWE

PROLOGUE

Somewhere, a field of crops turns yellow and dies. A wheat mill is lost to flooding. Bovine corpses lie slack across dry earth patched with receding grass.

The systems that depend on this food fail. Prices rise, economies crash. Entire cities starve.

The people hear of potential aid, potential war, potential further disaster. Then the broadcasts stop, and the signals fall away, and they hear nothing more.

The Earth is thrown away, hitting the inside of the bin and dragging the black bag down with it.

RAB FERGUSON

Or tell it differently.

Despite his lover's protests, the prince begins to chop away at the first of many trees. He will clear this forest, and build a city upon the land: the greatest city the world has ever seen.

CHAPTER ONE

'It's your fault we live here!'

Joe regretted the words as soon as they came out. His father, David, did not reply. He just stood there, looking hurt. The guilt that swelled up in Joe was heightened by how close together they were. He could see every line of David's weary face, from the greasy hair on his forehead to the slight sag on his cheeks.

In their cramped home, there was no way for Joe to step back. The shack's wood-panelled walls warped inwards like a closing hand, pressing father and his sixteen-year-old son together. The ceiling was low and made of sheet metal, which grew so hot in the daytime that if Joe stood up straight, it burned a welt across his scalp.

A lightbulb hung down between Joe and David, dangling on a long wire, but there was no electricity. The only illumination came from the moon shining through a square hole where there once was a window. The warm night rolled in through the hole as well, carrying with it the thick smell of rot.

On the far wall, there was a stove that didn't heat and a faucet without water. Three lumpy mattresses were laid over the splintered floor, with threads stretched and broken across them. Joe's grandfather, also called Joseph, had been asleep on one of the mattresses. He was stirring now, disturbed by Joe's raised voice. Grandad was skeletally thin apart from a bloated little stomach, like all the people of the town.

Between Grandad and the wall, a line of cloth sacks were filled to bursting and tied at the top. A string-less acoustic guitar was slumped next to the sacks in the corner. A snapped plastic guard across the guitar's surface displayed an illustration of a species of bird that Joe had never seen, and probably never would.

Joe had been pushing his father for an explanation of how they had ended up living in a ramshackle town, scavenging waste to survive. David told him the same he always did. Everyone had known the world was getting warmer. There were news reports on the risk of shortages and economic collapse, but life in the city of Madera had gone on the same.

David was one of the many who ignored the signs, carrying on as if things would somehow return to normal in the future. Despite concerns from Grandad and Joe's mother, still living then, he convinced both they should stay. Even as fuel reserves ran low, and options for travel became scarce, still he stalled.

Soon, food supplies dwindled in Madera and costs surged. Eventually, there was nothing left in the shops. It was only then that David finally took action, when it was too late to properly search for a new place to live. He lifted Joe in his arms, and their family walked out of the city with thousands of others who'd let everything slip away. From there, they'd walked for

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miles till they'd found this place that once used to dispose of the city's waste. It was a fitting place for them to end up.

'It's just difficult knowing how life was in the city, before everything,' Joe said, reluctantly trying to take the sting out of his previous words.

David nodded. He looked as sad and broken as the guitar in the corner.

'I could tell you a story about the city.' Grandad murmured, sitting up on his mattress and scratching sleepily at his beard. Everyone called Madera *the city* now, as if it was the only one that had ever existed. 'About what it is and how it came to be.'

Joe crouched down, looking into his grandfather's rheumy eyes. 'Another time, Grandad. Sorry I woke you.'

Grandad relaxed down again, then spoke muffled on his side. 'You raised your voice before. Don't forget the tale of the man who shouted often, and the man who whispered only once.'

'I won't,' Joe said. 'I remember all your stories. And I remember which man the people listened to.'

Grandad murmured assent, closing his eyes. Joe and David waited as the old man drifted back to sleep, the only sound his wheezing breath.

Once his grandfather was asleep, Joe went to the shack's window-hole. Part of him still wanted to rage and yell, and get his anger out. He knew it wouldn't really help, especially since his father never argued back. Joe sighed as he looked out over the town.

Shacks similar to their own were packed in tight rows down the slope. There was a gap through the rows where a trench ran down the hill, splitting the town in half. The

townspeople called it the stream, though the ground within it was as dry and hard as the rest. Beyond there rose the mountains, gigantic summits of waste once known as a landfill. All the rubbish there had been thrown away by Madera, back when the city still functioned. The mountains were black in the night, dwarfing the hill they lived on.

Above the mountains, tiny shapes swirled over the stars. It was impossible to tell which were plastic bags lifted on the wind and which were crows. When Joe looked at the mountains, their moulding stench grew stronger. It was as if the sight of them pushed their poison into his lungs.

David joined Joe by the window-hole and looked out.

‘How could one city throw all this away?’ Joe asked.

‘You couldn’t have saved anything for us?’

David scratched dirt out from under his nails. ‘When I look out at those mountains, I always wonder how much I threw away. I’m sorry this is the life we live, Joe. I wanted better for you.’

David’s apology only irritated Joe. Sorry didn’t change anything. He turned away from his father and left through the front door, out into the night where the full moon shone overhead. Joe envied the moon, separate and away from it all. He knew if he stayed he would end up saying more that he’d regret, and he didn’t want that. He strode quickly away, aware of his father’s moonlit face watching him go.

CHAPTER TWO

Joe squeezed through the spaces between shacks, heading towards the dry stream. He avoided the shacks' window-holes, where he might be caught by someone wanting to talk, and held his nose as he passed one of the shared outhouse toilets that stank as badly as the mountains. The toilet was nothing more than a wooden box over a pit in the ground.

At one point he stopped abruptly, having almost stepped on the leaves of Ms Winnipeg's carrots. Some of the shacks, such as hers, had vegetables growing around the walls. They never amounted to much, twisted morsels that were barely even a mouthful of food. There wasn't enough nutrition in the earth, and the sun was too cruel.

What a place to live, Joe thought. Even plants can't grow properly here.

All the real food came from the other three communities: the gardeners, the fisherpeople, and the hunters. It was brought to the town by the drifters, who drove electric cars and vans, charged at an old building called the recycling

centre that had a solar powered charging point. Electric vehicles were the only ones that worked anymore, as all the petrol stations had run dry before everyone started leaving the city.

The automatic sorting machines at the recycling centre let you charge a vehicle in exchange for depositing recycling, so drifters would trade food for recyclable waste collected from the mountains. Occasionally, if a townspeople had collected enough, they'd purchase some seeds or a plant from the drifters as well, more as something to tend than something to eat.

Those carrots don't look like they have much life left in them, Joe thought, looking at their flaky brown leaves sticking out from the ground, but he still watched where he stepped. He walked by more shacks he knew well. He passed Alice's with a smooth stone dug into the earth before the door as a ramp, the Artist Sisters' surrounded by animal shapes crafted from reused tin, and the Singing Family's where he imagined he heard all four of them – father, mother, son and daughter – snoring in harmony.

Joe reached the edge of the dry stream and jumped down where the dirt banks were taller than his head on either side. He went uphill until the trench flattened out, then turned to see the whole town below him. A few hundred sheet metal roofs glittered like water in the moonlight, parted by the dry stream cutting through their middle.

Even there at the top of the hill, the mountains towered dark and high above him. The town was surrounded by desert, which wasn't made from sand but hard earth with dust across its surface. To Joe's left, the desert was rolling hills, cracked brown slopes like the one the town sat upon. None of them were nearly as tall as the mountains. To his right, it was flat, stretching out to the horizon where the city twinkled as a

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single light, like a star that had fallen from the sky.

‘The lights are still on in Madera,’ Joe muttered to himself.

But Joe’s father had told him that a lot of the street lights and office buildings were powered by similar automated renewable systems as the recycling centre. It was part of the too small and too late efforts that had been made to combat climate change. It didn’t tell them anything about what it was like in the city now. All of humanity could die out, and Madera’s light would carry on twinkling.

Joe walked down the other side of the hill, so the town was out of sight behind him. Here was the fallen forest, where dead trees lay in scattered patterns across the earth. There were thick oaks with roots that clawed upwards out of the dirt, birch trees snapped and white, and hollow willows with long branches draped across the ground like hair. There was wood to be found on the mountains, so this quiet and still place was left untouched by the townspeople.

Grandad had told Joe a story once, of a desperate man who’d come to the fallen forest in the night for wood to sell to the drifters. He’d been met with crows perched along every one of the logs, watching him sullenly. It was said in the town that the crows listened to the whispers of an old woman they called the Witch.

Rumour had it that it was the Witch who’d talked the termites out of the dead trees, and killed the rot inside their wood with a well-placed word. No desperation was worth crossing her and risking a curse placed inside your heart with her bony fingers.

The man turned from the forest and instead walked out into the desert, even though walking there meant death.

When the daylight came, the sun burned the water from his body and the pink from his skin, until he was only a black mark on the earth. Grandad told him no one knew if it was the Witch's power that had caused the man to walk out into death, or if it was the man's fear of her power. Grandad said one was not too different from the other.

As Joe walked through the fallen forest, there appeared to be so many of the collapsed trees that they became indistinguishable, so that it would be impossible to find a comfortable log one night then return to sit on it the next. To do so required the same trick as finding your way on the mountains, where the waste had to be looked at not as a whole but as its constituent parts. On the mountains, Joe saw the shapes made by the rise and fall of countless rubbish-filled bags. Here, he saw the shapes made by the particular trees that lay together.

With the knowledge of a thousand nights walking through the forest, Joe found his way to a fallen oak that was long enough to lie down on and speckled with white dust. The contours of this log were like his own fingerprints, an integral grain within Joe's life. He sat down on the oak and looked out at Madera's light sparkling beneath the moon.

'Joe,' said a gentle voice from the top of the hill. She was a distance away, but she cared for quietness, and knew how far her voice could travel. At seventeen years old, she was slightly older than Joe, both of them on the cusp of adulthood together. Her name was Sonya.

She had braided hair, with loose tufts and curls sticking out. Her brown skin was flecked with scratches from their work. Her clothes were tattered and losing their colour, like all fabric collected from the mountains. She carried the thinness and

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bloated belly that life in the town gave with a simple acceptance. Her footsteps were soft but audible as she walked through the fallen trees toward him. She sat down by his side and linked her arm through his.

‘I heard you shouting before,’ she said.

Sonya was the reason this oak log was special to Joe, why out of all the trees in the fallen forest, this one was significant. This was where she sat with him. This was where once, when they were much younger, she found him after a similar argument with his father. She’d given him a rock to hit against another rock in the ground, and told him to keep on doing it until his anger was gone. It worked, because she’d laughed at how silly he looked smacking rocks together, and he’d ended up laughing as well.

This log in the fallen forest was where they told each other stories, built from the stars in the sky or the rubbish on the mountains. This was where they made each other laugh, at the strangeness of their town and its people, at how they lived off waste and at how they always stunk. This was where they argued, but not how Joe argued with his father. They were good arguments that made it feel as though talking about things mattered.

This log was where they took off their clothes and lay together, and she made him feel the closest he could imagine to the exhilaration of swimming in a river. Afterwards, when they were done, was the only time when his body felt soft and clean. It changed the inside of him as well, as if barbed emotions like bitterness and anger could no longer snag in his chest. Instead, they floated away with his easy breathing.

‘I was arguing with my father,’ Joe said, smiling simply because she was there.

‘I know,’ Sonya replied. ‘As does the rest of the town, the crows in the sky, and anyone who happens to be on the moon.’

He laughed and pulled her close into his side. ‘I wasn’t that loud.’

‘You’re still banging rocks together, Joe,’ she said, ‘after all these years.’

‘Except I wasn’t hitting against rocks tonight.’ Joe rested his cheek on Sonya’s head. ‘I was hitting against my father. We were talking about how the world used to be, and I got so angry. I said what I knew would hurt, and I wish I hadn’t. It’s like Grandad’s story, where each time the man cuts someone with his knife, he cuts into his own soul as well. I don’t want to be someone who hurts people. Not Dad, or anyone else.’

‘Of course you don’t.’ She rubbed her thumb along his arm, keeping his stress from building. ‘You’re made up of kindness, Joe. Anger’s just something that gets tangled up inside you.’

Sonya always described Joe as the sort of person he wanted to be. Sometimes he could almost believe her. They both watched a dim, almost imperceptible light move across the horizon, heading towards the brighter light of the city. It was one of the automated trucks that travelled back and forth from the recycling centre, the place the drifters visited to use sorting machines and charge their electric vehicles. The trucks were never manned, driving in an endless loop between the city and the centre.

‘I think,’ Joe said, speaking aloud something he’d been considering for a while, ‘I think I need to see it. The city that threw away the mountains, that my father took me away from.’

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The light that we see every night, but we don't really know what's there. It feels like a missing piece of my life, like if I saw it I could make some sense of myself.'

Sonya's thumb stopped moving on his arm. 'I still remember it there, more than you do. I remember starving for days, even worse than it gets here. My mother and I lived with hundreds of people under a bridge because we couldn't afford to stay in the empty houses. Mum said that even then, there were places they didn't want people who looked like we did to live.'

She took her hand away, and ran her fingertips idly across the texture of their log as she went on. 'We huddled around fires in oil cans. Everyone just kept leaving, standing up and walking away from the city. Some people hotwired abandoned cars, looking for any that still had petrol left in them, and drove as far they could on what was in the tank. When we did the same, we had to drive so slowly because the roads were full of people. They were as far forward and behind as you could see, carrying what they could and getting out. We were lucky to find this place. You were too. There's nothing in the city for us.'

'That was a long time ago. Maybe things are better there now,' Joe said. He felt Sonya shake her head, nuzzling against his neck. He knew what she was thinking. 'It might not be like your mother's dream.'

'It wasn't a dream, it was a vision. She saw the city still going on without a single person in it. Traffic lights changed on deserted roads. The man turned green and beeped away, but no one crossed. The street lights came on at night, but only for the wolves. In the offices, the computers' fans whirred and symbols bounced around on their screens. The video adverts still played

in the underground stations, even while the trains sat unmoving on their tracks.'

'But when you were in the city, people still lived there. No one's actually seen it empty.'

Sonya pushed herself up on the oak, sitting straight and leaving a space between them. 'All the adults say that life in the cities fell apart. Everyone left. It was on the news, on the tablets and phones, before the signal fell out of the sky. If it all started working again, they'd need the mountains. There used to be a road here, where the trucks came down to dump their waste. If they'd made a better life there again, wouldn't they have fixed the roads? Wouldn't the trucks be coming here?'

'Maybe it's different,' Joe said. 'Maybe they're not throwing everything away anymore. Or maybe it's the same, and they're dumping the waste somewhere else, and couldn't care less about having a road to us.'

'There's no way to leave the town. Walking out is death, and the drifters won't take anyone with them. Even if they did, none of them would ever go to the city. They're too frightened of the journey. If you start dreaming of it as a better place, it's only going to torture you. There are good things about our life here. We have food, water and shelter, and the people in this town look after each other. We've got me and you.'

'It's not about if it's better or worse than here.' Joe put his arm around Sonya's shoulder and drew her to his side, pointing up at the full moon. 'Look at the moon. We don't know what it'd be like up there, if it'd be good or bad. But wouldn't you go if you got the chance? Wouldn't you risk everything to see what you could find there, walking in its dunes and caves, to see the night sky from standing on its strange grey earth? Even

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just to look back, and see here from another place? It'd give you new sights and new thoughts. Wouldn't you want that?'

'No,' she said, snuggling down under his arm. 'I'd be afraid that for all that new, I'd lose the old things I care about. But I know you'd go, if you could.'

She wrapped her arms around him, then laughed. Her laugh was silk on the air, and it tickled in Joe's ear.

'What's funny, Sonya?'

'The city's already too far to reach. But the moon? You're going to have to practise jumping.'

'I will,' he said, breaking free of her arms and springing up from their oak. He leapt over a fallen tree. 'I'll practise every day.' He jumped over another. 'You'll see me in the mornings, getting higher and higher. One day you'll be collecting and you'll see me jump right over the mountains.'

Sonya laughed again, shifting her weight on the log. Joe took her hands and pulled her up, so she stood close to him. He could smell the sweet scent of yarrow oil in her hair. Her and her mother kept yarrow flowers from the gardens in plastic pots around their shack, and boiled the petals over a fire to extract the softening oil for their braids.

'I'll jump to the moon, grab you a moon rock, and jump back here to give it to you.'

'I hope you're as good at landing as you are at jumping,' Sonya said, then kissed him. She smiled, leaning back with her arms around his waist. 'If there's something missing inside you, then you'll find it inside you. You could walk the whole world, looking outwards, and still feel wrong.'

'How do I find something inside me?' Joe asked, the feeling of her lips still tingling on his.

'Maybe you need to bring everything else together

first.’ Sonya swayed herself from side to side on Joe’s hips. ‘Your mind’s looking for the city, trying to remake it from the waste on the mountains. Your heart’s on the moon, leaping over craters and cheering at stars. If you pulled yourself back together, if all of you was here in one place, maybe you’d feel more whole.’

He caught her mid-sway and held her close. They turned as they talked, half-dancing between the fallen trees. ‘I know I can’t go to the city. But sometimes I wish I could get out of the town, just for a little while.’

‘You should go to see the Witch. She helped my mother.’

Sonya’s mother Demeta sometimes went to the Witch’s shack for visions. It was there that she’d seen the empty city. Sonya had described her mother’s experience to Joe. She’d told him how the Witch had bled a dead crow into a pot with a fire below it, then stirred herbs in as well, and waited until black steam rose up from the bubbling crow’s blood.

After that, the Witch pinched a mushroom and dipped her hand into the boiling mixture, showing no signs of pain. She lifted the mushroom out, now a congealed red blot between her fingers, like the heart of one of the rats watching from the shack’s corners. Demeta opened her mouth and the Witch pushed the rat’s heart to the back of her throat, then flicked it down her gullet.

As the Witch pulled her fingers out of Demeta’s mouth, the shadows fell from the walls and Demeta felt her body dissolve away, rising with the smoke. Her mind was left floating in the Witch’s shack, open and unprotected, filling with images of an empty city that she took for signs.

‘I don’t want to see the Witch,’ Joe said. ‘It’d do as much good to get drunk with the Moonshine Brothers, and see

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what dreams swim in my head then.'

'My mother said the Witch's visions show you what you need to know, even if it's something you didn't realise you needed.'

Joe let go of Sonya and crossed his arms over his chest.

'You only don't want to go because you're afraid of her!' Sonya said.

'Yes.' Joe nodded. 'Yes, I am. She's a scary old lady who talks to rats and crows, and everyone says can put a curse on your soul. She's without a doubt the most frightening person I've ever met. I'd say more, but I'm scared she'll hear me somehow and crows will peck out my eyes.'

Sonya laughed again, then raised her chin so he could kiss her. They stayed like that for a long time, kissing slowly because there was enough night to last. Eventually she stepped back from him and drew a square of foil out of her pocket.

Condoms could sometimes be found amongst the rubbish on the mountains, their packets airless and limp. They were just another item that had been easy for people living in the city to throw away, emptied out from pub machines and pharmacists' stockrooms. Even using the condoms, the risk of pregnancy was still there, which would be hell while living in the town. The last children to survive birth were twins named Tiger and Lily, six years ago. Every pregnancy since, and several before, had ended in either miscarriage or stillbirth.

With the condoms, they did the best they could to prevent that. They only slept together when they had them, and they'd been lucky so far. Joe took Sonya's hands, squeezing them in his own before pulling her to him. The gasp Sonya let out was the long breath of a flowing stream.

Joe felt warm light flickering on top of his eyelids, as if he lay under water with the sun breaking across its surface. He sat up and opened his eyes. Sonya was lying on their oak next to him. The stars were gone, the sky blue. The sun was rising behind the mountains, highlighting their edges with an orange glow so it appeared they were aflame. Joe nudged Sonya and she smiled as she sat up next to him. Neither spoke, both enjoying the peace.

They knew a day of collecting on the mountains approached, working where the ground shifted underneath them. Where if one glass bottle was knocked out of place, it might be followed by rolling bin bags, then a yellowed fridge-freezer or a cracked ceramic bathtub. Once something that size was dislodged, the whole side of a mountain could start to slide towards them. When there was an avalanche, all they could do was run. If they were caught up in the bags and the waste, they'd be crushed beneath their weight.

It was important to take pleasure in the quiet moments. They lived a dangerous life, scavenging from the landfill mountains.

CHAPTER THREE

By the time Joe returned to his shack, the sun had risen above the mountains. He went quickly inside, his head already beginning to ache from the heat. Granddad sat inside, in front of their counter built across a stove that didn't heat and a faucet without water. He was on one of three mismatched stools they had taken from the mountains, eating porridge.

David had already gone. He'd be up on the mountains, finding new places to dig into and fill a sack with anything he could sell. The size of the mountains, and the relatively small population of the town, meant that the vast majority of the landfill was undisturbed. Madera had thrown enough away that in fourteen or so years the scavengers had barely scratched the surface of what lay within the waste.

Of the whole town, it was often Joe's father who'd collected the most when a drifter arrived with food to trade. He'd start collecting even before the mountains were lit by the sunrise, picking out items in the first embers of the orange glow. He'd still be there when the sun set behind the fallen forest,

continuing on as everything turned to deep blue.

‘You should eat.’ Grandad indicated a bowl of porridge for Joe on top of the dead stove. Through the open back door an empty pan and a jar of oats were on the ground next to the remains of a fire, a thin wisp of smoke still rising up.

Joe lifted a brown bottle from a bunch in the shack’s corner – all glass, as the drifters paid more for plastic – and went to a bucket of water between two of the mattresses. He dunked the bottle under the surface to fill it. David took the bucket to the stone well and back before sunrise each morning. It was the one miracle of the town, the deep well that tapped into spring water that flowed far beneath the earth. If David waited for the daylight to fetch their drinking water, the metal handle would become scorching hot and burn a blister across his palm.

Joe filled another bottle and handed it to Grandad, who wetted his beard slightly as he drank. Joe sat down with him and ate the porridge. It was made by boiling oats in water, and Joe had to drink between each spoonful to push the grey slime down his throat. When he’d finished eating, it left a sticky sensation on his tongue.

‘You’re often angry at your father,’ Grandad commented.

‘I don’t mean to be. I get frustrated when we talk about how things used to be.’ Joe got down from his stool. He picked up two more glass bottles, the size that used to hold wine, and went to the bucket.

‘You blame him for our lives here.’

Joe pushed a bottle under the water, air bubbles rising from it. ‘I don’t... I know he couldn’t change what happened to the world. But I wish he’d tried to do something, rather than

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convincing you and Mum to stay in the city.’

Grandad had turned around on his stool to look at Joe. ‘He did try to do something. He tried staying. That was the choice he made. Be careful how you tell his story. It will affect how you tell your own as well.’

It was for good reason that Grandad was known in the town as the Storyteller. He told tales to the townspeople, and his mind worked to the patterns of stories. However, if anyone said that to him, he’d reply that all minds did.

Joe put the second bottle in, but it clunked against the bucket’s base. He lifted the bucket instead, pouring the water carefully into the neck of the bottle. Afterwards, he put the full bottles into his and Grandad’s cloth collecting sacks. Both already contained poles and tarp for casting shade, as well as a few filled water bottles that David placed in them earlier that morning.

‘Let’s go,’ Joe said, lifting both sacks and carrying them towards the front door.

Grandad followed him, walking stiffly but well for a man of his age. ‘Maybe you can learn something about a person from how they raise their children. Your father taught you to be kind. You carry my collecting sack without me even having to ask.’

‘Will you tell a story in the dry stream?’ Joe said, changing the subject. The heat prickled his skin as they walked out into the sunlight. The morning was warming up, though was nowhere close to the intense temperatures that would be reached around midday.

Grandad’s walnut face cracked into a huge smile. ‘I will, Little Joe,’ he said, using Joe’s childhood nickname. ‘I’ll tell The Boy Who Learned What Fear Was.’

‘Good choice. I like that one.’

They squeezed through the shacks until they got to the bank of the dry stream. Joe took Grandad’s hand and helped him down, joining the flow of people heading towards the mountains. During the daytime, the mountains weren’t black but vivid and multicoloured. Every aspect of human waste spilled from bin bags of various colours and sizes. A crowd formed around Grandad, knowing a story might be coming.

The townspeople had various skin tones, a diversity of races and cultures having found their way to the mountains as the old society crumbled around them. Those who had rarely mixed in the city were neighbours in the town. They had different structures to their faces, and different lilt and expressions to their voices, relics of the times when people used to move around the world.

What brought them together was their thinness and their bloated little bellies. Their round joints bulged from their limbs, the shape of their skeletons clear. In that way at least, they were all the same.

‘Back in the old days, when the air was not so hot,’ Grandad began, ‘when people lived in the city and talked on phones, watched television and worked in buildings that scraped the sky, there was a man who had a son. His son was not like other children. He’d never once felt his breath tremble or his heart pound, he’d never been afraid, and he asked his father to teach him what fear was...’

The crowd around Grandad grew as they walked down the dry stream, more townspeople descending the dirt banks and joining the listeners. Tiger and Lily, the young twins, scrambled down, carrying a duffel bag between them. Their tired-eyed older sister Rose followed behind. Ms Winnipeg, the grey-haired woman who lived near Joe, sat on the bank and

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lowered herself into the trench, shushing those who offered to help so she could hear Grandad's telling.

Further down the stream, two men that the townspeople called the Husbands saw the story coming and stopped to wait for it, empty bin bags in their hands. They were a couple. The taller of them was called Marco. He was dark haired and serious, and would engage Joe in discussion around ideas of how less wasteful societies might be created in the future. The shorter man, Harvey, preferred casual conversation and laughter.

The titles some people in the town were given, like everyone calling Marco and Harvey the Husbands, or Grandad the Storyteller, were used more often than their actual names. There was no official giving of these titles. They developed through talk on the mountains, and then ended up sticking.

Joe had once overheard Marco telling Harvey that he disliked the title they shared, saying that he didn't like being described in a different way from other couples in the town. Neither of them had gone on to ask the others to stop calling them the Husbands, but since hearing that Joe didn't use the term, and used their names instead.

Joe realised he wasn't listening properly, and returned his attention to Grandad's voice. Several of Grandad's stories were set in the city, and how he described it changed from telling to telling. In this tale, the city was a place where people were afraid to venture out from beneath the street lights at night because there were things that crept in the dark, shadows that moved through the derelict buildings, empty playgrounds, and abandoned churches.

'The boy saw how his father stayed under the bright lights, and he knew this was because his father was afraid, but he couldn't understand

what afraid meant or how it felt. Since everyone else seemed to understand, the boy thought he must be missing out on something important.

‘He told his father he wanted to learn what fear was. The father was too scared to go into the night himself to teach his son, so he used his computer to post an advert, offering good money to the person who taught his boy what fear was.

‘A poor man saw it as a chance to make easy profit. He hid in a gutter where he knew the boy would pass, dressed in black clothes, and held a knife in each hand. When he saw the boy, he leapt out, brandishing the blades above his head. Without speaking a word the boy grabbed the poor man’s hands and jammed the knives into each of his thighs, then walked on without even quickening his breath.

‘The father was horrified when he found out what had happened. Now he was scared not only of the night but of the boy, and so cast him out of his house. The boy walked out onto the dark streets, muttering that it was no use, that he’d never learn what fear was. But a voice behind his ear said: “Are you sure of that? Would you bet your life and soul on it?”

‘The boy turned and there was a rich man behind him, smelling of money as rich men do. The rich man held out a key between his manicured fingers, a plastic tag tied to it by a string

‘He said, “If you stay one night in this flat, your life will be blessed with a woman who loves you, and you’ll always have enough money to eat what you choose and live where you want. However, if you fail and leave the flat in fear before the night is over, your soul will be mine.”

‘The boy thought this over. He did not trust this man. He had heard stories of a devil that lived in the alleyways and gambled for unsuspecting souls to add to his collection. Yet, knowing no fear, he did not think he could possibly be scared out of the flat and lose the bet. He said “I accept” and took the keys.’

By this point, the crowd was quiet and focused on the story, even Tiger and Lily listening intently. Joe kept his eyes

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out for Sonya walking ahead, knowing that she hated to miss Grandad's storytelling, but he didn't see her.

'The boy found the building by the address on the plastic tag, and saw that the flat was on the top floor. He climbed the stairs, up and up and up. When he reached the door, he didn't hesitate to let himself in.

'Inside the flat, a dead woman hung by a rope from the ceiling fan, her face blue and her tongue bulging out of her mouth. The boy almost laughed. The rich man's lost his bet, he thought, if he expected me to run away just because of a dead woman. So he sat down on a chair and waited for morning, imagining what he'd eat when he could eat whatever he chose.

'Three hours passed, and then the dead woman's eyes snapped open. Despite her bulging tongue blocking her lips from moving, she spoke to him with a demon's voice. She taunted him to come over and kiss her, and told him how she'd scratch away his flesh and claw the marrow from his bones.

'He only snorted in reply. She still hung from the fan and posed no threat. He turned his chair away from her, ignored her words and imagined where he'd live, when he could live wherever he chose.

'Three more hours passed, then there was a crash behind him. The fan had dropped from the ceiling and the woman's body was on the floor. She clambered to her feet, reaching forward to claw at his eyes. The boy knew his living limbs were more nimble than hers, which were stiff with death.

'He walked calmly around her, unknotted the rope from the fan, and tied it instead to the radiator. He walked around her again and sat back down in his chair, turning it to face her. She stretched her arms out towards him, but the rope held firm no matter how much she pulled. He watched her, looking at her blue face, bloated tongue, and the red mark the rope made around her neck, and imagined what the woman who loved him would look like.

'Three more hours passed, and then the sun rose. When the light

hit the woman's face her tongue shrank, the blue faded from her cheeks, and she became the most beautiful girl the boy had ever seen. He untied her and she thanked him, saying that he'd broken her curse, set on her by the devil of the alleyways.

'They immediately fell in love, and a few days later the boy was employed by a successful company. For the rest of their lives, they were able to choose what they ate and where they lived. They never saw their devil again.

'The boy learned what fear was, because when the girl he loved walked with him at night, he knew the dangers that lay waiting in the dark. He didn't want her be hurt, or for him to be lost, leaving her alone. Maybe he would never know the sensation of fear, but through his love for her, he knew what it meant.'

Grandad finished the story at the bottom of the dry stream. There was a brief silence, then applause from the crowd, including enthusiastic clapping from Joe and Sonya. Several people approached Grandad to tell him they were looking forward to hearing him at the next celebration. Eventually the crowd dispersed across the empty ground leading from the end of the town to the start of the mountains.

The earth near the mountains was stained dark shades of purple and green, in a tideline that seeped out of the waste and stopped before the town. Nothing would grow in the purple-green ground, despite multiple efforts that had been made. It revealed what the mountains really were, the congealed scabbing of a wound that bled out into the dirt. The waste even stank like an infected injury.

Some of the townspeople no longer noticed the smell, but not Joe. It forced its way through his nose, and he even tasted it in his mouth. He and Grandad stood where the earth was still brown, next to the stone well. The well only reached as

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high as Joe's knees, but it plunged deep into the ground.

'You changed the story's end,' Joe commented.

'The story changes every time I tell it. But it's important, when you change the ending. It makes a difference to everything that came before. I've told you how this well is older than the town and the mountains, haven't I?'

Joe nodded.

'Stories are like the well. Very old and used by many different people, in many different times. Even when you think you're telling a new story, you shape it out of all the stories you've heard before. You build your well out of those same old stones.' Grandad hmm-ed, working out his words. 'The original ending of that story doesn't sit right with me. The girl throws fish in the boy's bed, there's a creeping sensation on his skin and he knows what fear is – what's that? It's a cheap trick. If I tell it that way, it feels like lying. A storyteller can move the stones around, but they can't just place them wherever they want. There has to be truth under the surface. The well has to draw water.'

Joe often had the impression that when Grandad spoke about stories, he was talking about more than just stories. Mr Rajarshi, Grandad's friend, joined them by the stone well with a heavy-duty bin bag in his hand. Joe gave Grandad the cloth sack he'd been carrying for him, then watched as the two old men walked together towards the mountains.

There was no exact point where the mountains began, only a gradual increase in waste over the purple-green ground. First there was a scattering of lighter rubbish, such as empty shopping bags, crumbling polystyrene and foil wrappers. Then dotted amongst it there were bin bags, these early ones already torn open with nothing of worth left inside. In many, thick

green mould clumped over what remained of the contents.

The bin bags increased in number until they piled on top of each other. The gaps between them were crammed with materials that couldn't be sold and so had been left, unrecyclable packaging, ruined cardboard, broken metal and infested fabrics all shoved together. The waste built higher, and larger objects could be seen, including glimpses of rusted appliances, crumbling furniture, even skeleton shells of cars and other vehicles that David said were never supposed to come to the landfill.

High up around the peak of the first mountain there were townspeople collecting. *They look like insects from here*, Joe thought. From the top, they'd be able to see four more peaks with dipping valleys between them, all infested with more people setting up shade and picking through the rubbish.

So much waste had been left behind from the city that even though they'd been collecting for years, there was still much more to find than had already been scavenged. Most of what they sold to the drifters were recyclables – tin cans, plastic bottles and clean cardboard. Some electronics were also recyclable and had good value for trade, such as the battery-dead smartphones and tablets.

The drifters took it all to the recycling centre, where they deposited the collections into sorting machines in return for credit to charge their cars and vans. The centre had been part of an environmental scheme prior to society falling apart. The items that had been valued in that scheme were ones that drifters would trade more for.

Recycling at the centre was poured into automated trucks that took it away to the city, like the one Joe and Sonya had seen the night before. When the trucks came back to the

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recycling centre, they were empty and ready to be refilled.

Where does it all go? Joe wondered to himself, as he and Sonya waited for more of their collecting group to arrive to head up the mountains.

The townspeople were unsure of how much of the automatic system still survived, and it seemed likely the recycling was all ending up piled somewhere in the city. The only reason the drifters kept coming back for the recycling was for the credit to charge their vans. A few of the drifters had owned electric vehicles when living in the city, though most had acquired them as a means of survival before leaving. Driving the electric vehicles, and having control over trade, meant the drifters were the people who had to worry least about having enough to eat.

Non-recyclables were sold to the drifters as well, including tools such as shovels, nets or axes. Joe had recently found a set of fishhooks, which he'd exchanged for wolf meat when they'd last had a drifter visit. These sorts of items were sold onto the other three communities, the gardeners who grew grain and other food on fertile land called the gardens, the fisherpeople who lived by the sea and fished from boats, and the hunters who roamed wild, stalking the few animals that were left in the parched desert.

There was the Mechanic as well, a woman who lived by herself away from the communities, in a dilapidated garage. She worked with a store of parts, as well as salvage brought to her from the desert, to keep the drifters travelling. It was a situation that couldn't last forever.

When the electric cars and vans started to fail, they'd need to work out a new way of surviving. Everyone said that with the Mechanic's skills and the long-lasting batteries, it

would be ten or twenty tears, maybe more, before that problem arose. What they'd do then was a question Joe had often asked, but had never had properly answered.

The townspeople heard news from the other communities through the drifters, but hadn't seen the places where the others lived. The drifters refused to carry passengers. None of them were willing to take the risk of someone trying to steal their vehicle. Everyone stayed apart, even as they relied on each other to survive.

All the adults in the town and the other communities, anyone who was more than a few years older than Joe and Sonya, had some part in building either these mountains or similar ones elsewhere.

How many of them feel the shame my Dad does, Joe contemplated, and carry the weight of the mountains on their back? And how many of them don't think about it at all?

Now, running across the purple-green ground towards Joe and Sonya, dodging through the scattered waste, were Tiger and Lily. Two children who'd done nothing to make the mountains, but had to live off them all the same. Their older sister, Rose, who'd looked after the twins since their parents were lost in an avalanche, couldn't collect enough to feed the three of them by herself, so they had to collect as well. It was the only way they'd have enough recyclables and sellable objects to trade by the time the next drifter arrived.

Rose followed after the twins, looking bemused by her younger siblings' antics. Tiger and Lily skidded to a stop in front of him and held their hands out, with string entwined around their fingers. Lily separated her palms, stretching out a spiderweb pattern between them. Tiger had a single length of string leading from one index finger to the other. Both twins'

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hands were rough from collecting on the mountains, their skin marked with lines and scratches.

‘We learned a new trick!’ Tiger exclaimed.

‘Can we show you?’ Lily asked.

‘Go on then,’ Joe replied, and Sonya nodded eagerly. Tiger and Lily jumped apart, and Lily thrust the spiderweb pattern towards Tiger. He pulled his line of string taut between his two fingers and Lily swept her hands back and forth, so the spiderweb drifted like a wave. Tiger brought the string down between Lily’s hands, somehow passing it through the rippling pattern, then lifted it up and out again. Once Tiger’s string was free at the top, they both turned proudly back to Joe. It was a good trick.

‘That was brilliant,’ Joe said. He crouched down and helped them remove the string from their fingers.

‘Where’d you learn that?’ Sonya asked.

The twins pointed towards the Witch’s shack, closer to the mountains than the rest. It had no window-holes, though there were little hollows at the base of the wooden walls for the rats to come and go. The roof was covered in crows, all staring towards Joe and the twins, as if they’d been watching the trick.

Joe knew that Tiger and Lily were lying. The Witch didn’t play games with string. It was more likely to have been Grandad who’d shown them how to do it. He’d have taught them as well that the story of a trick affects its magic, and that saying the mysterious Witch told them how to do it would help wow their audience.

‘Come on, let’s get up the mountains. We can meet the others up there,’ Joe said, anxious to move away from the crows’ glittering black eyes. He’d joked with Sonya the night before, but the Witch really did send a tremble running down his spine.

The rats and crows nesting in her shack, the mixes of blood and herbs to send people into trances, her ability to predict how someone's illness would progress – all of it unnerved him.

What bothered Joe most about the Witch was that no one knew her real name. She was only her title. It was as if she only had featureless skin where her face should be. Joe led the twins towards the mountains, Sonya and Rose following close behind. All the way, Joe felt the crows' eyes fixed on the back of his neck.