



Excerpt from

Our Staggering Minds

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Prologue

A woman steps out of her jeans and folds them with slow precision before leaving them on the wet sand. Pulling off her jumper she hesitates. It's a flint-grey day. In her red vest and dark briefs, she walks towards the tide, letting the breakers swirl over her bare feet, and the wind whips up her murky blonde hair.

I'm not there. I'm not the one scanning the deserted beach pocked with knots of seaweed. I'm not the one witnessing the woman take tentative steps into the cold grasp of the North Sea as the surf foams around her shins. She wades out and when the water is lapping at her thighs, she stands still (for 6.5 seconds) and then she hunkers down, giving in to a wave that yawns over her head. You see her head rise again and she swims out, further and further — a fading blot.

According to the website, this was posted up two days ago and it's out there for all to see. Four minutes of life. You shouldn't watch a thing like this. I click PLAY again and when the video reaches its end, I run it once more and pause over the smudge of hair blown at that moment when she turns to put down her jumper. The face is a distant blur of pixels — it could be anyone, except that it isn't. This isn't what Isobel would want you to see, this isn't how she'd want to make news. My hand hovers in front of the screen, a muscle memory recalling the touch of her neck through summer-sweated hair.

And then I follow her again into the shaky view of the sea until the camera swings away to two seagulls fighting over a bag of crisps on the sand, the screeches of the birds lost in the slap of wind.

I mustn't play this again. I won't.

“Rosh, you’re fool enough of a boy to have your head turned by others,” my mother used to say. The fact is — we never know how much space we occupy in another’s mind. I only know the lives that have dug into mine. And when I thought I was beginning to know myself, I messed up and then messed up again.

I was born before video cameras became omnipresent. There aren’t streams of photos giving my life away on the internet. As I claw through events trying to make sense of who we became, the memories flip up out of sequence: a hole in the gutter as I stand in the fist of a heat wave and look up at Isobel’s house; my toenail snagging under my duvet and hooking into a coiled pair of blue knickers; Gemma in a pub talking epigenetics; and my mother stepping out of a police car in her slippers, her lime nightdress puckering below her coat.

Over and over I’m drawn back to when we were young — unbaked and standing on the threshold of possibilities.