

APOPTOSIS

Dana Fox



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Your future is haunted.

1.

I'm on the train somewhere between Herne Bay and Birchington, coming back from work, when we slow to a crawl and then stop. Nine minutes pass, then I get impatient.

I scratch at the prickly fabric of the train seat. I wonder how much human skin just got stuck under my fingernails and who it belonged to. Through the window I can see the ruins at Reculver, a pair of ancient towers fuzzy in the summer haze.

Trains aren't very busy these days. There's only three other people in this carriage. A woman types on her laptop across the aisle. Two seats ahead slumps a large man, the side of his rubbery head pressed against the window. Further down, a teenaged girl with split ends and wide tatty jeans looks out of the window towards the sea. Perhaps she's looking at Reculver too. She looks the sort.

The train manager's voice comes over the speakers, a distant, crackle. There's a 'passenger incident' and we could be 'some time'. The woman closes her laptop and looks down the aisle. She puts her laptop in her bag. The man with the big head wakes up. The teenage girl tries to look out the window as far down the track as she can, leaning her elbow against the seat, half-standing.

The automatic doors hiss open. A dead man stands at the entrance. He's about thirty, his head tilts slightly to the right and upwards, fossilised veins run under the pale meat of his throat. He's wearing a pastel blue hospital gown with a pattern of light green squares. He looks down his nose at nothing in particular, with stale eyes.

The woman across the aisle makes a noise somewhere between groan and a shriek. She clutches her bag tight. Her arms are as stiff as his probably were not too long ago. He's maybe two days dead.

The dead man shuffles silently down the train. I tell myself that he just looks like a tired, unwell young man, but his face is a sterile, waxy mask, unresponsive and disaffected. His bruised fingers drag along the armrests as he goes and I shift over, as close to the window as much as I can.

I expect to smell something damp as he goes past. His sparse hair is pressed against his scalp. It looks dewy like a newborn baby's. As I catch sight of his bruised back, I realise I'm holding my breath. The dead man stops at the doors to the next carriage. He pivots around to his right and bumps gently into the interior wall, his face squishes against the panelling. Then the doors open. He spins slowly back around and he goes through.

The man with the fat head swears loudly.

'Why do they have to let them on? How does it get on a train anyway?'

The woman gets up, holds her bag in her arms, tight to her body. Her jaw spasms and tears spill down her cheeks. She can't get out of the carriage quick enough. After a minute or so, people start making their way up the train past us. One or two of them try to push past the others.

The girl, though. The girl gets up, hoists her dusty rucksack onto her shoulder and follows the dead man. There's another announcement asking all passengers to move forward into the first few carriages if they want to, but I stay where I am.

I look at Reculver again. It seems so far away, always threatening to fall into the sea. I haven't been to the beach for months, which seems stupid really, since I live thirty seconds from the biggest one in the area.

Another hiss. The girl comes back through the doors and behind her, the dead man follows. She has him gently by the elbow. She's wearing latex gloves, the same colour as the dead man's skin. It's like she's leading an elderly person over a crossing. She glances at him

sometimes, saying things like 'Come on' and 'this way, mister'. I never heard anybody talk to one of them as gently as she does. She looks at me and winks, then smiles and carries on leading the dead man up the aisle.

The fat man is up on his feet, his back pressed against the window as if he's being robbed at gunpoint. He says 'What the fuck are you doing, love? Don't *touch* it.'

The girl pays no attention. She gets the dead man through the doors and that's when I get up. I see her pressing the button to open the doors. The dead man tries to carry on into the next carriage, but she gently pulls him back. She kicks the door, then pulls the red emergency alarm.

'I can get him off,' she says.

The speaker just above the door gives out static. Then, 'It's your shout, love.'

'Open up, mate,' she says. 'I can get him off, I swear.'

Then all the doors on the train sigh open and a hot, beautiful breeze floods the carriage. I'm in the vestibule watching her jump down onto the gravel outside. The dead man steps forward and falls, crumpled to the ground. Unhurt, of course. They can't hurt any more, but it struggles to get back up.

She stands behind it and hoists it up under the arms. Its gown flies open at the back, revealing far more than I needed to see of any man, living or dead. The girl reties it.

I stand in the doorway and watch the dead man walk up the dry, grassy embankment. She follows close behind, nudging it away from debris, ditches and rocks. I can smell the ocean already.

The lights on the door start flashing and beeping. I have about three seconds to decide.

I jump down off the train and land with only slightly more grace and athleticism than a two day old corpse.

2.

This is not the apocalypse. They don't lay siege to farmhouses or shopping malls and they don't eat people. This is much worse.

Just like today, I was coming back from work when the world turned inside out. I work as a personal assistant for someone with more money than time or organisational skills. I shouldn't say who it is. I do everything from booking his flights and ordering fabrics, to changing his gin-soaked bedsheets and hiding paper twists of white powder from his wife.

I remember after I was done for the day, I was walking down the high street to the tube. I can never get home quick enough. It's a two hour journey door to door, but I couldn't live in London again, especially now. As long as he pays my train fare from London to Margate, I have a job.

I used to think nothing could interrupt the day of a Londoner. After the bombings, all public transport was shut down for the rest of the day. So people walked home. Quietly, diligently. When the floods happened back in 2026, commuters took a different route around the evacuated areas. When everything goes to shit, people in London are the most stoic human beings in the country.

But that day was different. I remember people were gathered on pavements, watching the news on their phones, or in pairs and groups in cafes, huddled over each other watching wall-mounted TVs or their laptops. That's where I saw the first reports, in a cafe near Old Street. Open-mouthed baristas stood around like statues. A gay couple were crying on the table next to me.

On the way home, I could spot the faces of the people who already knew. They looked like they'd lost something important and had given up searching for it. In a way, they had. We all had, it just took a while for it to gestate.

You can still see the first videos that went viral. The crying nurse who'd locked herself in the staff room. She was holding the phone so low down that her chin looked massive, live-streaming, saying how two people who'd just died in a car wreck were now staggering down the hallway as if nothing had happened. She had a streak of blood across her eyebrow. Made her look like she was returning from battle.

Or the one of the funeral on the Isle of Wight. Chairs overturned, white lily petals scattered in a trail across the wet grass. And a dead man in a nice suit, standing by an open coffin, with a look on his face like he'd missed the ferry.

There were so many more.

It wasn't long before everyone had seen them in the flesh. Did you know that about 2000 people die in the UK every day? I read that on the internet. Dead people used to do the decent thing and lie in the same place and wait to be taken away, but now it seems they're impatient. If they're able to, they wander around, stumble out of residential homes, hospitals, houses. They make no noise, cause no physical damage and they barely seem to notice any living people or even each other.

They walk into walls and they rot. It is utterly pointless.

It started a year ago and it's still happening.

I've been walking slowly behind the girl and the dead man for ten minutes now. I've taken off my jacket and folded it over my bag. It was cooler at five this morning. If I weren't following a weird teenager and a walking corpse across a field of desiccated strawberry plants, this would be a perfect early summer evening. I wonder whatever happened to those.

I'm calling her weird, but I'm the one who jumped off a perfectly good train miles away from home. She knows I'm here. She's caught my eye a few times, but not said anything yet.

She's more intent on steering the dead man across the field, keeping it from falling over any more. When she got it walking in a straight line, it was going faster than I'd ever seen one of them go. I don't know how long rigor mortis lasts, but this one's got quite a pair of legs on it. I just wish I didn't have to look at its bruised arse.

'So, are you just gonna hang back there like a creep,' she says, 'or do you want to help?'

I pick up my pace, dodging dried up gulleys and stepping over the dead plants until I catch up with her.

I'm old enough to be her grandfather. Just.

'If you get them out in the open,' she says, 'then they can go a lot faster. Well, some of them can. Here, keep him off the plants and he'll be fine.'

She takes off her latex gloves and hands them to me, but they're too small and I can see clammy perspiration inside. I must have made a face because she sighs and looks around, then picks up a long stick and hands it to me.

'Just nudge him. You see him about to stumble into something, poke him the other way. It doesn't hurt him.'

'I wasn't worried about hurting it,' I say. So I hold the big stick, not sure what the hell I've apparently agreed to do, and she lights a cigarette. 'You're way too young for that.'

I look at her properly for the first time. Her eyelids are greased with kohl, her hair has been bleached within an inch of its life. She blows smoke and sighs, smiling.

'Careful!'

And then the dead man falls on his face, the culprit a small rock. Its bare feet are covered in dried soil, which gets into the bloodless cuts over the soles. She helps it back up and it begins walking again.

'You're not much good at this, mister. Anyway, I'm nineteen.'

'What exactly are you doing?' I say. I'm scanning the ground for obstacles now.

'What are you doing?'

'I couldn't just stay put while you wandered off with one of these things.'

She grunts. 'Maybe you'll tell me the real reason later. Anyway, you're helping me now. Live close?'

'Margate. You?'

'Nope, I don't live in Margate.'

She grins in the sunlight, tosses her cigarette and we walk. A little later, I see a plank of wood coming up. It's going to stumble again, so I tap the dead man on the side of its right shoulder. It misses the plank. The girl nods once, firmly, with a satisfied smile.

'Where's it going?' I say.

'He. Where is *he* going.'

When it all started, people panicked because they'd seen movies and thought that they were all going to die. That fear didn't last long. Some were overjoyed that they got to see their loved ones again. Then came the public health concerns.

As soon as everyone quietened down, a few things became clear. Dead people weren't violent. Far from it; they were placid, silent and, as I was learning today, could be easily herded more or less wherever you wanted.

But they didn't recognise their family members or friends. That pissed a lot of people off. There was a family on the news who'd held a welcome home party for their grandfather. It was the most macabre thing I'd seen that day. Balloons, banners, a mum and dad with forced smiles, while an old dead man sat expressionless on a plastic patio chair. The children were crying.

Most people die of invisible diseases and tend to be intact, I think is the polite word. But accidents happen and the ones deemed 'unacceptable' were taken away quickly, out of sight.

Nobody asks what happens to them. Those left didn't pose much of a health risk because, for some reason – and this is a revolting thing to say, I'm sorry – they didn't decompose as you might expect. No bloating, no maggots. Instead, they became drier and more *crisp*, until finally, their skin flaked like old paint and they began falling apart.

It was grim seeing some of the older ones begin to crumble on the street. I once saw an entire foot with its toes stuck in the drain, while its owner vacantly limped along the gutter. People turned away every time they witnessed stuff like that. Eventually people just stopped seeing it at all.

I know every country had its own way of dealing with it, but Britain's still figuring it out apparently. Cremations are encouraged, as quickly as possible. But there's no way to stop a dead body waking up. It happens fast, so some still end up on the streets.

Like I say, I wouldn't live back to London again.

We come to the top of the field and I use the stick to poke it across a path. I feel absurd. The dead man begins slowly up a little grassy verge, so I go to follow it, but the girl puts her hand on my elbow.

'He's okay now,' she says. 'You don't need to go any further.'

'Shouldn't we get it...Uh.'

'He. And it's fine. We did our bit. You actually did pretty good. Most people run a mile.'

I realise I've no idea where we were aiming for. I can see the Reculver ruins just behind the trees. The dead man disappears over the crest of the hill and we decide to do what many people in Britain do, whether tourist or native, on a good day or a bad one. We go to the pub.

3.

I'm confused why she didn't want to go up the path towards the beach and then past the ruins. We'd have to go to the pub much sooner. Instead, she insisted we went across the fields, through the abandoned holiday homes and then past the tiny village. Most of the houses around here are bungalows, cold and silent. No cars passed us, except one mean-eyed boy-racer lunatic. Aside from that, we didn't see a single person until we got to the pub.

It was a longwinded route, but I suppose it was a nice walk. The sun won't set for another few hours, the sky is already slashed with that incandescent salmon hue which Thanet sees so often. There's a reason Turner came here to paint the skies.

She puts her bag down and I get my wallet out.

'Ooh, no,' she says with her careless smile. 'You don't wanna give me any coins. This one's on me.'

I sit on the edge of one of the benches with bag on the table in front of me. She comes back and puts two pints of ale down. On the table, someone has written 'Please Don't Die Here' in black marker.

'Karen,' she says, sitting. 'Since you didn't ask, that's my name.'

I tell her my name and I thank her for ale. We clang glasses together gently.

'I don't think I've seen anybody do what you just did,' I say. 'Not with those things.'

'Okay,' says Karen, spreading her hands and then wiping ale off her lips. 'First off, they're not *things*. They're people. Or they were people. That dude we just helped? Someone loved him. He was someone's son, maybe someone's dad, brother.'

'They can't be people. Not any more,' I say. 'And if anybody cared about *him* then why's he left wandering around like that? You could see his arse.'

I already know the answer to this. The dead aren't the only things crumbling. Papers are full of stories about people not turning up to work and I can't say I blame them. Christ, nobody can even bothered to fight wars any more. It might seem picky to fret about unfilled potholes and public parks going untended for a year, but when you see the boarded up shops and the now monthly bin collections, I get the picture: a lot of people have given up. Slacked off. Bare minimum.

'Yeah, you could see his arse,' Karen says. 'He clearly snuffed it in hospital, but by the time anybody cared enough to check on him, he'd wandered off. Could've come from Canterbury, for all we know. Anyway, all alone like that. It's not right.'

'And now he'll be wandering all alone across Herne Bay, frightening dog walkers.'

'Nah, he won't.'

Well, that's settled then. After our pints, Karen and I walk along Reculver Lane. Turns out she actually lives in Herne Bay, and I want to make sure she gets home safe. Also, I think I'll get the train home from there too. I thought I had work tomorrow, but she's reminded me that it's Friday. I wish we could walk along the clifftops, but she says this way is quicker for her.

I've already said I don't like these narrow country roads, but I give up. My new and unusual little friend makes me feel older than I already do, so I try to enjoy the warm evening and another walk.

'What do you do again?' she asks.

'I spend four days a week putting out someone else's fires. Small ones, really. In London. I'm lucky, the commute is the only bad part. You go to college or something?'

'I've kinda made this my job.'

'Parents?'

'My Dad died when I was really little. Mum's still alive though. She's Greek. She's retired now. Really cool. You should meet her one day. You got family?'

'Funny, my wife was Greek. Anastasia. Ana. We're divorced.'

'We're everywhere, babe. Salon or restaurant?'

'You can't say *that!*'

'I'm allowed to. The whole service industry in Thanet would've fallen apart if it wasn't for us,' she laughs. I laugh too, for the first time in as long as I can remember, and it's damn good. I realise I've been waiting for permission to even smile for so, so long.

After a while, I say, 'We had a daughter.'

'Had?'

She's still got the stick and she pokes at the ground in front of her as we walk, swiping gently at any tall plants, not hard enough to break them.

'She wasn't even one year old. She ... she died. Five years ago. Before... everything.'

She stops. So do I.

'I am so fuckin' sorry.' Then she says, 'Do you have a faith?'

'Does anyone any more?'

The day I found Lily not breathing was the worst day of my life and I reckon it'll not be topped any time soon. When Ana left it only cauterised the wound. I went to a support group for a few months afterwards. It didn't make me feel better or worse, so I stopped.

Whatever faith I might have had evaporated at Lily's tiny funeral, so when the first reports about the dead were confirmed, I was surprised to find myself thanking god that it didn't happen to her. Seeing those people on television, having 're-birth' parties, as they called them, made me feel angry. You're just going to watch them crumble away and it's not even really them.

I don't know what the rules are about death and grieving. They seem to have changed lately, but I've been finding it easier to think about Lily now. And now I have someone to talk to about her, at least for today.

'I hope it's okay to say this,' says Karen. It's the first time I've heard her defer to me. I don't know how confident a nineteen year old girl should be, but she's certainly led me around today. 'Whatever went wrong, it only affects people who die after it started. Lily's in a better place. That's what I believe.'

'Looking around today, I would have to agree. It's okay. Thanks.'

We don't have time to move before the car comes around the bend towards us and crashes straight into a tree. I don't know if there was a noise. The front of the car folds around the trunk in an unbelievable, crumpled ribbon of white metal. Every window is a spiderweb of chaos. The front wheel is turned at a strange angle. It spins and then stops.

A few more metres. Or if there'd not been a tree. That's all I can think. We're alive.

It's a man. A kid. Slumped back. A torrent of blood pours down his chin and from his nose. A chest of ruined flesh and soaked fabric. It's the one who sped past us before, I'm sure of it.

'Fuck *me.*'

I get my phone and dial.

All circuits busy.

Karen wrenches open the driver's door and unclips his seatbelt.

All circuits busy.

'Is he breathing?'

All circuits fucking busy.

'Of course not,' she says. She's calm. Why is she calm?

'I can't get through to 999. This is unbelievable.'

'He's dead. There's no rush. He's dead and you know what comes next.'

I can't listen to this. I run up the road, around the bend but I can't see any other cars. I holler for anyone. Reculver's back behind us. Herne Bay is closer. If I can get some help. I try my phone again.

Every call hits an engaged tone and rings off. Nobody turned up today, I guess. Please Don't Die Here. I run back to Karen. The back of the car looks perfect. It's jarring.

I look at him again. His face is shock white. Eyes closed. Blood on skin and glass. The car is off the road, wrapped around the tree. He's dead. So what am I rushing for?

'Help me,' Karen says. She's down at the boy's feet, trying to move his legs around to the side. 'He's gonna need help. Let's get him out.'

I can't believe I'm doing this. Isn't this illegal?

I don't expect him to be so warm. Karen takes him by the legs and I take him under the arms. There's a wet crunch from inside him, an intimate grumble of bone so close I can feel it. He's heavy. We carry him out of the seat and lay him on his back. Karen is more gentle than I am. I've touched three dead bodies in my life and two of them were today.

The boy's sternum has been pulverised by the steering wheel. I hope he didn't feel anything. Dark hair, white, almost luminous skin, streaks of red. Navy blue clothes. I take a deep breath. Karen sits cross legged next to him and sets the timer on her phone.

I sit down too and look up at the sprawling tree that saved our lives. A stark, ancient oak against a bright backdrop of cerulean, pink and orange, looking down upon a nightmare.

4.

It takes nine minutes for the boy to wake up again. I'd never seen it happen before.

The dead man on the train was a few days old, I think. He already looked like he'd been freeze dried. But this boy is still warm, there's something supple about the way he lies there. If it weren't for the gaping hole in his chest, you could have almost believe that he was just passed out drunk.

Then his eyes had opened. He was both returned and departed at the same time. Something went out, replaced by the pretence of awareness. It's different when you see it happen in front of you.

That was when Karen stopped the timer on her phone.

'I can't find no rhyme or reason to it,' she says. 'I thought it was something to do with age. The younger they were, the quicker they came back. But that's not it at all.'

'How many have you seen come back?'

'Only a few.'

The boy's left hand curls up in a weak fist. Then he turns his head a little and his jaw slackens. He bends his legs. He might be able to stand up.

Karen stands over him with her stick, a gentle smile and an outstretched hand. To my surprise, he reaches out with his right hand, then his left. Maybe it was just an automatic movement.

I don't even need to be asked. I get up and we pull him to his feet. I have blood on my hand. The boy stands on his own two legs, but his torso leans to one side. I don't know if it's his ribcage or spine. It doesn't seem to matter to him. His tragically young face glows, his eyes unflinching in the direct sunlight. I take him by the shoulders and gently spin him around.

Karen cocks her head to one side.

'I don't want it... I don't want him to go blind,' I say. She smiles.

The boy turns himself a little more towards Reculver. He begins to walk. With every step, his torso lurches to the side, but I don't think he's going to fall over. Or apart. I still hope he can't feel anything.

It looks like this is the direction he wants to go, so we walk with him. I step over the drops of blood he leaves in his wake.

I don't know how long we walk. I'm still stunned. Occasionally, Karen taps him with her stick to stop him veering off into the bushes, but otherwise, he follows the road. I'm glad nobody passes us, either by foot or by car. I'm not sure how I would explain this, or even if they'd want to know. Most people just keep their eyes down now, no matter what. I certainly did until today.

Karen's so unusual, so I don't feel I need to explain myself to her. I go next to the boy and walk with him. I want to look at him, to really see him.

In life, I think he'd have been about twenty. He's got a dash of freckles across his nose and cheeks, and a bit of stubble. I can't tell what colour, because the blood on his chin has dried to a dark crust. A shot of more blood streaks out of one nostril. This close up, I can see the glassy bulge of his corneas. He never blinks. I wave a hand in front of his face. Nothing. Maybe he can't even see. This could be all smell, or instinct, perhaps something else.

I never imagined I would do this, but I press a finger gently on his cheek. He's cool now. His skin doesn't spring back immediately, but slowly like it's filling with liquid. He doesn't react.

Karen glanced once or twice, but, mainly she's swiping at the air with her stick.

'I'm not being weird or anything,' I say quickly. 'It's just...'

I don't know how to say it.

'It's just it's the first time you've actually seen it happen, so it's the first time you've seen them for what they are. I get it.'

'It was easier to think of them as, I don't know, meat. Meat that had gone wrong. Only a bit more alive than a pork chop.'

Karen laughs. 'A pork chop.'

'I'm sorry, lad. You're not a pork chop,' I say, but he's not offended.

'You ain't gotta explain yourself to me, babe,' she says. 'Did you ever push any of them under a bus?'

'What? No.'

'Or spray-paint their faces with swastikas and shitty words? Did you ever stick QR codes on their backs to sell weed?'

'Of course not. People *do* that?'

I release I tend to avoid the living as much as the dead. I look down, look away. Everyone does. It's death, it's life, of course we turn away. The world is failing me, and words fail me even more. I know what I feel, but I don't know how to talk about it. What Karen's describing is grotesque.

I don't know if they're still people, or if they feel or think. All I know is I just saw a boy die, then re-awaken as a lost, empty shelf himself. I've seen this rupture up close. So now I want to carry on seeing, until we get to wherever he wants to go.

'I once saw a guy deliberately run over a dead woman,' says Karen. 'He reversed over her three times. He was laughing. She couldn't get back up. There was nothing much left. In the end, they came and took her away, shovelled her into a fuckin' bin bag, of all things.'

'What have we done to ourselves?' I say. 'And that's when you decided to do this? This... vocation.'

'Don't get me wrong, I don't go out of my way to find them, but whenever I see one, this is what I do. This is where they take me. They just need a little help.'

'Where? I still don't get it.'

All three of us walk further. I take the stick from Karen and help the boy stay on the road. I can see Reculver again. Those old stone towers used to be a monastery, built on a Roman fort. The Romans used it to guide their ships. Over a thousand years later and it's still doing its job.

We go past the pub. Our empty pint glasses are still on the table. We pass a decrepit, boarded up ice cream shop, stencilled with faded pastel murals of a summer that we'll never see again.

When we get to the top of the hill Karen begins to guide him in an easterly direction towards the cliffs. The sea glitters gold in the low sunlight. I'm confused for a moment and then I see the concrete steps going down.

I get in front of the boy, ready to catch him if I need to. I don't look at his chest, just his eyes. Karen guides him down the steps and I carefully go backwards. Step by step, his torso still leans to one side and his knees aren't bending very much.

'Come on, lad,' I say. 'All that walking was easy. This where you really need to use your legs.'

'It's hot,' Karen grunts, her arms wrapped around his shoulders as if she's expecting a piggyback. 'You know rigor mortis? Well, I'd be shit a my job if I didn't know this, but when it's hot, it sets in quicker.'

'You learn something new every day,' I say, practically folding the boy's knees each time. We're doing the walking for him, but he gets to the bottom. I forgot it's all pebble beach around here, littered with rocks and empty mussel shells. He's not going to make it over this.

I'm so clammy and chest is throbbing. I'm feel so unfit, but then I realise I just carried a dead boy down a flight of steps.

Karen jumps off the steps and lands with a crunch. The boy stands still. Karen smiles and nods at something over my shoulder.

I turn around and my throat spasms. All along the beach stand the dead, hundreds of them looking out to sea, their long shadows thrown against cliffs of chalk.

Karen tries to guide the boy a few more paces, but he's very stiff now. He orients himself to face the ocean. She shrugs. Okay.

I see the dead man from the train not too far away, his chin still tilted a little upwards, looking down his nose at the horizon. I notice the little plastic tag around his wrist. His name is Francis.

There are men, women, even children, once all so different but now impartial in this community of the dead. Some have fallen to the ground over time, supporting themselves upright on a skinny arm or two. Their legs are withered to fibrous bone and stiff rags, conjoined with flotsam and discarded plastic. One is just a collapsed skeleton, dusted with salt, its eye sockets merely little pools of seaweed. Perhaps the bones are still aware somehow.

'This is where they want to be. The salt water preserves them,' she says. 'Not forever, of course. They dry up instead of getting all squishy like bodies did before. And nothing eats them, so they get a bit more time. Antony Gormley ain't got nothing on this.'

Karen puts her hand on my shoulder. She's gentle, platonic. There is no sexuality or sensuality to this girl, not around me. I don't know how to articulate it, but it's just not there. Our strange and violent afternoon hasn't been complicated even more by any flirting or subtext. I certainly don't fancy her. To be honest, I haven't fancied anybody in a long time.

She leads me to another skeleton.

'And eventually,' says Karen, 'they end up like her. The tide comes in and takes a little more of her. People came from the sea, so I guess it makes sense. What happens after that is a mystery, babe.'

Karen smiles down at the skull. She digs the stick into the pebbles and flicks some of the incoming water at my leg. I brush it off my trousers and growl.

'Your wife's name, Anastasia. Do you where it comes from?'

Ana and I still talk sometimes, on birthdays and whenever she gets any of my mail. But if I ever knew this, my mind's a blank. Maybe I *make* it blank.

Karen says, 'It comes from the Greek word, anastasis. It means resurrection. When Paul came to Athens, they ripped the piss out of him for preaching about bodily resurrection. You know the dualism thing: the body is a vessel and nothing else. They said there was no point in god imprisoning souls in decaying bodies.'

She guides me through the frozen congregation staring out to sea. I can see them now. Their faces, dried, pale, mottled, yellow, all different, all still human, even the skeletons. We stop at another small, sad-looking pile of bones, wrapped in seaweed.

'You think this all a punishment then?'

Closer, I see that it's not sad, not at all. I don't think I ever noticed how beautiful human vertebrae are, a repeated sequence of elegance and order. The sleeping skull is empty and untroubled.

'Not for me to say. I'm Karen and I just do my job.'

I won't go to work on Monday. I probably won't go back at all. Karen and I stand on the beach as the sun falls. When the sky turns purple, and the standing dead are hidden safely in twilight shadows under the first stars, I finally understand who she is and why I'm standing here.