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'Memorable. I loved the pace and verve of Alice's voyage from Shoreditch to suburbia, and the unexpectedness of the story as it swerves past the familiar into a dangerous and beautiful unknown'

Helen Dunmore



An extract from Landfall by Helen Gordon

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Landfall

by

Helen Gordon

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Part One

‘Most people at one time or other of their lives get a feeling that they must kill themselves; as a rule they get over it in a day or two.’

How Girls Can Help to Build Up the Empire: The Handbook for Girl Guides

(1912)

Alice thought she saw Janey sitting ahead of her on the plane from New York. For a moment the impression was so strong that Alice almost called out, even though she knew it couldn't have been her sister. The woman had the same hair as Janey; that was all. When they were very small Alice had looked at their hair – Janey's long and blonde and floating; Alice's a thick, dark block – and decided that her sister must have been adopted, and for days afterwards Janey had hidden every time the doorbell rang, convinced that her real parents were coming to take her away.

She put down her book, got up and walked along the aisle to the toilet, and then turned at the last moment to look back at the woman. It was not her sister. She was surprised, after all the years, that the feeling of disappointment was so swift, so visceral. Alice remembered how for some time after Janey had gone their mother and father had come to seem a little ghostlike, how sometimes she'd found herself flinching from their searching glances, their endless whispering and their sticky eagernesses. One Saturday she watched her father walking to the postbox and noticed the way his huge hands hung down, the empty palms turned backwards as if waiting for someone to run up and take hold of them. At the time Alice thought this was meaningful. Later, when she found a small photograph taken on a family holiday in Cornwall, from the time before her sister was gone, she realized instead that her father had always walked that way.

Returning to her row of seats, Alice climbed over the legs of the middle-aged American woman sitting by the aisle and leaned to watch the towering clouds forming beyond the small windows,

each one, white tinged with lavender and pink, like a beautiful idea that hovered teasingly just out of reach. The American began talking – about the psychiatry conference she was flying to Munich to attend, about her two brothers and her nieces, about her Blue Persian that had gone into a cattery in Denver while she was away. Despite the journey, the crushed and stuffy cabin, the American's hair bore all the markings of the salon she must have visited before the flight, with the blonde tints carefully woven between the grey, the scissor marks still visible, almost. The woman glanced at Alice, at her uncombed hair, bare face and bitten nails. Only men, the American said, could be so casual when they were no longer young. Alice, who was thirty-four but often told she looked younger (excepting the lines around her eyes when she smiled), couldn't decide whether she was being commended or admonished.

'And what is it you do?' the American said.

'I'm a journalist. I write for, it's an arts and culture magazine, *Meta*. And other places, some of the broadsheets . . .'

'*Meta*? I think I've heard of that. What did you say your name was?'

'Alice Robinson.'

The American frowned. 'No . . .'

Alice made a *fuggedaboutit* gesture. For some years now her writing in *Meta* had been considered 'influential' in the art world, and her reviews in the national papers regularly sent the public out to one or another exhibition, but she never particularly expected her name to be recognized outside of those places.

She leaned back and when she looked again through the window the clouds had parted to reveal the sea; the big, heavy silvered weight of it, and here and there the white tops of the waves like the bottoms of clouds that had drifted down to float and bob on the surface. She looked out at the empty, empty water and longed to see something: a boat, a piece of bright drifting plastic. The sea had always looked the same everywhere for ever; the water she looked

at now might never have been touched by humans, and all at once this seemed terrible to her.

The cabin jolted suddenly, rattling the ice cubes in the plastic cups, and the pilot's muffled voice came over the intercom. Turbulence. Alice and the American fastened their seat belts. The plane shook again and towards the rear of the cabin someone shrieked once, a guilty, choked-off sound. The American gripped the armrests until the skin around her fingernails whitened. The balding man sitting across the aisle glanced around suspiciously as though his neighbours might be somehow better informed, privy to some advance knowledge. Alice shut her eyes and thought about New York and the man with the drooping brown hair that reminded her of a singer she liked.

After the last private view she'd ended up by herself searching for somewhere new to drink and had followed two girls in matching berets to a large bar that looked like a youth club, with sweeping graffiti on the walls and rows of pool tables. She'd fallen into conversation with the man, the only other person alone and too old to be there, and they'd sipped bottles of weak beer while they played pool. Every time he smoothed down his hair – before he drank, before he played a shot – she saw the gold of the ring on his wedding finger. He had a car and they drove for hours through the half-sleeping city and he took her down through the Bronx to where they could see across the blackness of the water to Hart Island, where the unclaimed dead were buried in rows by convicts, fourteen to a trench. It was cold and they sat inside the car with the engine running. '*The Isle of the Dead*,' said Alice. He took a mint out of his pocket and looked at her blankly. 'It's a painting by Arnold Böcklin. You can see it at the Met.' He shook his head. When they kissed it was like being a teenager again with nowhere to go, and his arm was an unknown weight across her shoulders. This, she thought, is how made-for-television police dramas begin. She liked his hair. Later, after he'd dropped her off near her friend

Sophie's apartment, where she was staying, she bought a hot dog from an all-night store and the steam from the food mingled with the steam from her mouth and rose like a screen in front of her face.

Sophie, who was half French and half American, was living temporarily in a quarter of a rented brownstone with her husband, Philip. She was a doctor and a volunteer with Médecins Sans Frontières. Sophie made Alice feel small and useless. 'You make me feel like a parasite,' she said to Sophie over too many glasses of wine at a local bar. 'Come the revolution and I'm first to the wall. Actually, I wouldn't even waste the bullets. Maybe I could, you know, club myself to death on the bricks or something.' She knocked her forehead against the tabletop and the pale, greenish wine trembled in their glasses.

Sophie sighed. 'I'm worried about Philip,' she said. 'He still hasn't found any work. All he does is mope around the house and watch porn on the Internet. A fact he somehow thinks he's successfully hiding from me. I used to complain about that ad agency – you know, all the brightly coloured sofas and young interns and games rooms and the creativity-inspiring bar – but now I just wish he was back there. Last week, when I told him to think about retraining, he ate a whole loaf of white bread and wouldn't speak for the rest of the evening.'

Alice nodded, rubbing her forehead. In London, *Meta* was losing advertising revenue almost daily. She seemed to know a lot of people who now wanted to get into teaching.

'How's Peter?' said Sophie, changing the subject. 'Is his flat still disgusting? I think it was living with Peter's kitchen hygiene that convinced me to give up my student lifestyle and get married. You can tell Peter that I blame him entirely for my marriage to a carbohydrate coma.'

'He's well. He's good. He's dating this Polish art student called Anka. She wears a broken stiletto on one foot to remind her of the

suffering of the Polish dockers. She's, like, twenty-four or something.'

Sophie snorted. 'It won't last.'

'Why?'

'Because Peter's in love with you, of course. You know he's been in love with you since *for ever*.'

Alice had shrugged. People were always telling her that she and Peter were in love.

In the cabin the little Space Invader icon marking their progress from New York inched its way across a monitor suspended from the ceiling. The plane seemed to dip slightly and then settled down like an old ship falling into a comfortable trough in a stormy sea. Alice opened her eyes and tried to read. The American stretched, yawned, her breath smelling slightly doggy as she leaned over to read the book jacket. 'J. B. Priestley's *An English Journey?*' she said. She shook her head and settled back to tell Alice just how ridiculous it was to talk of journeys, which imply distance and perhaps transformation, when the entire country was smaller than Florida. 'An English stroll,' she said, and snorted. 'An English hop.' The English, she said, suffered delusions of grandeur, behaving as though the northern end of their country was somewhere in the Arctic and the southern submerged in the tropics.

They were late arriving in Munich because of the bad weather, and Alice had to run to catch the connecting flight to London. ('So much cheaper than going direct,' her editor had said. 'You don't mind, do you?') Hot and red-faced she found her seat, ordered a gin and tonic when the trolley came round and then dozed a little. When she woke and glanced out of the window she saw, hazed with fog, the island itself drifting into sight. The white cliffs were smudged with drizzle, caught in the act either of pushing up from the sea, like a swimmer surfacing, or of slumping, defeated, into the iron greyness. The coast was serpentine. Fog and bad weather made the edges of the island treacherous, difficult to approach by

water. Lighthouses, buoys, beacons, foghorns and radar systems warned ships away, but the plane, high above it all, slipped with little fuss from international to sovereign territory and then, over the airport, began to circle lower.

No one knew she was back home and so, in a way, she wasn't. This was recess, free time, a life temporarily suspended. The tower blocks and office blocks and church spires of the city seemed to float in the evening air and for a moment her heart swelled to see all the windows, all the lives behind all the windows, and for a moment London felt like something splendid and stirring. It was cold but her rucksack wasn't heavy so instead of going directly home she decided to walk along the Thames towards London Bridge, a favourite stretch of river passing the concrete bulk of the Southbank Centre, the Tate Modern, Shakespeare's Globe. Behind her lay the Gothic masonry of the Houses of Parliament where the calm gold circle of the clock's face hung like a second moon.

Sometimes, at times like this, she was surprised by how long she'd been living in London. Seventeen years ago, when she and Janey had been teenagers sitting hot and bored on a sun-stunned summer lawn, they'd traced longing lines backwards from the outer suburbs across the pages of the A-Z into the heart of the city, where, Alice had been convinced, the important parts of life were happening. London was a place where she'd find conversations about things rather than people, a place where art and culture triumphed over the dull biology of suburban existence. Now every year she had to admit that it felt less and less like the imaginary city of her fervid teenage dreams.

Her phone buzzed with a text message from Callum inviting her to his next exhibition – an unsubtle bid for some free publicity in *Meta* – and wanting to know whether she'd found his checked shirt. Time reasserted itself. ('Women can't wait as long as men,' her mother had murmured when Alice and Callum broke up.)

Callum was one of those men of a certain haircut who

gravitated towards the east of the city. Just before the relationship had finally expired he'd been working on a series of sculptures about the alienation of the artist in society. Built from scrap metal and string and wood, they were ungainly, clattering things set in motion through a complicated system of pulleys and weights. Alice had helped him with the mechanics. One of the first happy thoughts she'd had after the split was that she'd no longer have to sit uncritically through his disquisitions on the nature of art. On his side she supposed that there would also have been relief. Callum had always complained that she could be cold, and that she over-intellectualized everything she did. Every time they watched a film, he said, she had to try to turn it into a college course. Sometimes, he said, a movie is just a dumb movie, end of story. Alice sympathized with him: it was true, for instance, that she had difficulties fully believing that an emotion was anything more than the little cracklings and sparkings of the synapses of her brain. She was never, as he said, fully *engaged*.

She put her phone away and continued walking towards London Bridge. The lights were coming on in the buildings and once more Alice felt excited. It was one of those unplanned, uncreatable moments when she felt absolutely right to be where she was, blissfully correct in her own life, in her anonymity among the crowds walking down by the Thames, watching here and there a secret light glowing through a window and briefly illuminating a table, a long beige corridor, a silent figure in a doorway. She was by a pub, the Three Roses, and she felt that the thing to do was to rush inside and order a whisky and sit in a window seat and eke out those last moments of her trip before she headed irrevocably back to her flat and before the feeling of rightness left her, as it quickly would do. She assumed that for some people (for her sister, she'd always suspected) the feeling of rightness came more often, stayed longer.

Her mobile buzzed again. 'Alice? It's Dayanita. So, babe, how was New York?'

'Hey,' said Alice, now wishing that she hadn't picked up. 'It was

good, thanks. Ben from *Identify* says hello. I went to a knitting night.’ At some point, when Alice hadn’t been paying attention, a world of domestic crafts – knitting, sewing, baking, jam-making – had become suddenly fashionable. Dayanita, who was *Meta*’s publicist, talked about joining the Women’s Institute.

‘Knitting? Sounds fun. It’s ages since I was in New York. But listen, can you go on the radio tomorrow? It’s a panel discussion about, er,’ there was a rustling while Dayanita looked at her notes, ‘the commodification of the nostalgic impulse?’

‘Doesn’t our beloved editor want to do it?’

‘Tom’s got a bad cold; he’ll sound awful on the radio. Very phlegmy. Besides, you’re our star critic. They want *you*. The car will be round at eight thirty? Okay? Damn. Got another call coming through that I have to take. Remember, eight thirty. Ciao, babe!’

Alice finished the whisky, the ice cubes bumping against her lips, and left the pub. At the cathedral she climbed a narrowly twisting staircase leading to the top of London Bridge. She had been to a service there once when she was a child taken to church every Sunday morning by her parents. She remembered watching them take Communion and a child’s sense of outrage that they were kneeling before another adult, that they were being fed like babies or invalids. Later she’d gone to university and ‘lost her faith’ – an expression that she always felt implied an unfair carelessness. Lapsed, apostate. Peter, who had been bought up Roman Catholic, used to laugh at Alice and tell her that she couldn’t be a lapsed Protestant. ‘That’s like being a lapsed cinema-goer, a lapsed roller-skater,’ he said. Alice thought her difficulties were with the communal aspect of organized religion. She’d always found the first-person plural problematic. ‘I’m, you know, more a liminal sort of figure,’ she said to Callum when he complained that she didn’t spend enough time hanging out with his artist friends. ‘A limin; like a lemming but less hairy.’

★

She boarded a bus headed east, to an area of unprettified canals and blockish concrete industrial units, and stopped where, in front of her building, two gasometers rose and fell incrementally, alternately revealing and obscuring the city beyond. Home, but the sort of home that, after four years, still felt like a temporary, precarious pitching point that would never provoke a strong feeling of return. Alice's unit was on the seventh floor of the block, and this she loved. Every morning familiar landmarks rose to greet her out of the city wash of glass and metal and concrete: the Millennium Dome, the thin Tower 42 building, the shining silver of Canary Wharf, a land-locked lighthouse with its blinking red warning. About a quarter of the units in the block had been turned semi-illegally into flats and the rest were still used by the trades: garment factories, wood and metal workshops, packaging outfits. The fag ends of a country that had almost stopped making things, the so-called Industrial Island Machine, the Pyramidal Workshop. Inside, her housemate, Isabel, was sitting wrapped in a sleeping bag – with its concrete floor and long row of single-glazed windows it was always cold in the unit. Isabel smelled very faintly, sourly, of alcohol and must have been partying all weekend because a flock of beer cans crowded around the bin, stragglers balanced on the windowsills. The remains of a Pot Noodle and three glass tumblers filled with red wine had been abandoned on the dining table.

'Darling, you're back! How was? How's Soph?' Isabel jumped up and hugged Alice quickly before going over to the stove. 'Tea? Builders? Peppermint? I feel absolutely rubbish – quite poisoned by drink. Oh, and you forgot to set up a new standing order before you went. The rent was due last week but I couldn't quite cover your half . . .'

Isabel, a few years younger than Alice, lived on a mixture of furtive parental bank transfers and a growing number of brightly coloured credit cards. Her great-grandfather had been something quite important in India and her voice always made Alice think of the words 'high tea'. 'So how were the shows?' Isabel said.

Alice pulled a face. Mostly the art had seemed gaudy and smug and a little tired; engineered sensation with nothing much behind it. Nothing seeming to be at stake. A taxidermied stag had been hung halfway up the gallery wall from where it stared mournfully over the heads of the white-wine-drinking crowd. Reading her notes on the plane she'd thought that she wouldn't say any of that in the review, however, because the main artist was a friend of her editor.

'Enrico showed the stuffed stag thingy again,' she said. 'It was supposed to be the big piece but I can't think of anything to say about it. It had huge testicles. Like overgrown kiwi fruit. That's all I can remember. The huge testicles.' She sighed. Recently, writing anything seemed harder than it used to. Sometimes all she could find were the words of a playground chant repeated and repeated until they became nonsensical: Red lorry, yellow lorry, red lorry, yellow lorry, red lorry, yellow lorry, red lorry, yellow lorry, yellow.

She got up and dragged her rucksack into her bedroom, stretched and felt all the little bones in her neck click deliciously. Looking around, seeing the place with her tourist's eyes, she noticed how empty the room was without Callum's belongings. Why had she left it like that? With all the little spaces where a stereo had sat, a poster hung? Even the row of silver hooks on the back of the door retained a ghostly impression of his brown leather jacket and his long, black trench – the one he liked to wear with the collar turned up because it made him feel like a Russian spy. Alice pulled her own tweed jacket from off the end hook and hung it in the place where the black trench had swung. It felt like a small, pathetic victory.

'I bumped into Peter earlier,' Isabel called from the main room. 'He was talking about karaoke at the Prince George. And your mother rang.'

Recently there had been this awkward silence between them because Isabel wanted to move in with her boyfriend, Johnny. Or she wanted to move Johnny into the unit. And so Isabel and Alice had been circling around the problem of what to do with the flat, a

discussion that was moving nowhere, that kept getting mired in the English compulsion for polite indirectness. Now, instead, Alice turned to her bag and pulled out a bottle of duty-free vodka. 'Look,' she said, 'presents! Will this make the hangover better or worse, do you think?'

Later, she tried to call her parents back, imagining the telephone handset with oversized red buttons – compensation for her father's failing eyesight – ringing on the small table in the hallway. There was no answer. Her mother had probably wanted to leave new instructions regarding their approaching trip: an eight-month world tour including two weeks in Australia staying with her father's cousin and then on to America to stay with her mother's younger sister, Carol, and her new husband. 'Our last fling,' her mother had said, giggling girlishly. Alice wasn't convinced that there'd ever been a first fling. Her mother had been acting strangely recently. 'Might as well blow some of our savings before the economy blows it for us,' her father had said, and such flippancy was quite out of character for him also. Several years earlier he'd retired from his job as a parks manager with the local council, and now it was as if he and her mother had suddenly decided to step out from behind the monumental forms they'd taken in Alice's childhood and show themselves as people – full of foibles and recklessnesses, and not at all godlike.

Alice replaced the receiver and went to look for something to eat in the cupboard. There were three tins of Spam brought home by Isabel several weeks earlier. 'It's recession chic,' she'd said. They hadn't eaten the Spam. It sat there alongside a tin of mandarin oranges and one of evaporated milk. War-baby food. Alice stared at the cans. Then she poured two large vodkas and rolled cigarettes. To avoid the jetlag she was trying to stay awake until at least eleven. Alice was bad with jetlag. She opened up her laptop and selected a track, listened for a while to something heavy and discordant but

then, seeing Isabel's pained and hungover expression, exchanged it for an album of gentler, electronic seascapes.

Isabel took a swig of vodka and made a face but carried on drinking. 'Do you know what?' she said after a while. 'The vodka is making me feel better. The Swedish guys upstairs are having a party – shall we go?'

'A Tuesday party?'

'Tuesday is the new Thursday. Which means it's really Friday.' She shook what was left of the vodka bottle.

Alice thought briefly about the radio in the morning. 'Okay,' she said.

'It's fancy dress though.' Isabel looked around the unit and picked up a pair of sunglasses and her leather jacket. 'I'm going as a member of Baader–Meinhof.'

'You always go as a member of Baader–Meinhof.'

'So? It's easy. Come, Comrade Alice! Ve must to ze party!'

Alice shook her head. Isabel was bad with accents.



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