

# MICROCOSMOS

It was a Wednesday. The in-car thermometer was registering forty degrees.

Melodie held her bag on her lap, the red plastic pouch containing her most important

possessions: the buff notepad and its blue pencil, the glass medallion, a blurred Polaroid photograph of her best friend Sara. She shifted in her seat, the bare flesh of her thigh making a sticking, ripping sound against the plastic. She watched the back of her mother's dark head, her father's large hands on the wheel.

"Not far to go now," said Douglas Craven. "I could do with a beer."

"Beer?" said Bella Craven. "We'll be lucky to get decent water, the way he lives." She turned to look at Doug, presenting her retrousse nose in delicate profile. The seatbelt cut a diagonal stripe across her arm. Melodie looked out of the window, not wanting to attract her attention. The fields swept yellow and flat towards the horizon.

"I'm still not sure this is a good idea," said Doug. "We should leave him to decide on his own."

"He's incapable of making decisions," said Bella. "He needs a doctor, if you ask me."

Melodie counted the fence posts at the side of the road. From a distance they looked sandwiched together like the matchsticks in a cribbage game, but as they came closer they appeared to separate, sliding apart as if on metal runners. The space ahead seemed to expand and fill with colour as they entered it, like the dried flowers her mother put into water as table decorations.

The man they were going to see was called Ballantine. She didn't know his first name, her parents had never mentioned it. She tried names out on him: Dunstan, Waverley, Beresford, names she had read in books and especially liked. She found a pleasure in unusual words. She liked the patterns they made in her head.

The fields gave way to a no-man's-land of bare earth with outcrops of rocky scrub. From time to time they passed a petrol station or a storage depot or a scattering

of stone-built cottages. The cottages had mesh-covered windows and solar panels. There had been a toy tricycle outside one of them but Melodie found it hard to imagine what child might live there, so far from everyone else, so far from the city. Her mother leaned forward in her seat, groping for something in her handbag. The back of her dress was stained with sweat. They had been driving for more than three hours.

The road dipped and swerved, following the contours of the old river valley. The house appeared without warning. It occupied a position on what had once been the shore of a lake but was now a ragged shaft of land overlooking a vast cleft of soil choked with bramble and giant hogweed. It had once been white but was now a dingy grey. There were no other houses in sight.

Melodie had expected that Ballantine would be there waiting for them but the gravel drive was empty apart from a green Ford van. The van's chassis was mottled with rust and there was a thick coat of dust on the windscreen. It looked like nobody had driven it for weeks.

Her father brought the car to a standstill outside the house.

"I don't like the look of this," said Bella Craven. "I want Melodie to stay in the car." She clasped and unclasped her hands, twisting her rings.

"I want to play in the garden," Melodie said. The thought of staying in the car appalled her, although there was no garden to speak of, just some stunted bushes and a row of dented black oil drums.

"Let her stretch her legs," said her father. "She's been cooped up in here for hours and it's going to be a long drive back."

"You'd better not go running off, then. Make sure you stay close to the house." Bella unclipped her seatbelt. Her cheeks were flushed from the heat. They had

made a rest stop an hour before. Doug had gone to the kiosk and bought some spam sandwiches and a carton of Long Life orange juice. Bella had taken Melodie to use the toilet but had not let her wash her hands or face because the rest stop didn't have a water certificate. "Come on," she said to Doug. "Let's get it over with."

Her shoes crunched on the gravel. Melodie scrambled from the back seat. The outside air smelled hot and heady, filled with the acrid odour of dry bracken and baking soil. She went to the edge of the drive and looked out over what had once been the lake. The red leaves of the hogweed seemed to ripple and soar towards her, the stems tangled and shiny like a mass of exposed electrical wiring. They smelled of scorching rubber. Melodie knew that if you broke the stems of hogweed the milky mess inside could burn your skin. She held her purse to her chest with both arms and stepped back onto the path.

She felt nervous in spite of herself. She wondered where Ballantine was. Her mother had said he needed a doctor and she wondered if he had perhaps gone into town to find one. Her father had said there was a town close by, what had used to be the river port, although there wasn't much to see there now.

The house had no doorbell, just a tarnished brass knocker in the shape of a lion's head. Her mother knocked hard three times, just as Melodie had seen a policewoman do in one of the film dramas on the crime channel. Melodie was forbidden to watch the crime channel, but her mother occasionally forgot to reset the parental controls on her computer. There were three echoes, like distant gunshots, and then there was silence.

"He's obviously not here," said Doug. "He must have cleared out weeks ago."

"No," said Bella. "He's in there. I can hear footsteps."

Then the door opened and there was Ballantine. Melodie knew him at once as if she had dreamed him, created him herself from only his name. He was of medium height, with thinning grey-brown hair and a prominent nose that jutted from his face like the beak of an eagle. His eyes were a watery blue. He was wearing a pair of shapeless grey trousers in a tweed fabric that seemed quite unsuitable for the weather. One of his shirt buttons was missing. It had been replaced with a safety pin.

“Bella,” he said. “What are you doing here?” His voice was soft and low and Melodie had to strain to hear what he was saying. He stepped backwards, blocking the doorway. Bella folded her arms across her chest.

“Can’t we come in?” she said. “We could all do with something to drink.” She barged forward, perhaps trying to catch him off guard, but Ballantine did not move. He looked past her down the drive, fixing his eyes on Doug, Doug’s car, the green Ford van. When he saw Melodie he seemed to recoil.

“You can’t use the water,” he said to Bella. “We’ve had notices. We were cut off for most of last week.”

“God,” said Bella. “I presume you have bottled?”

“I’m almost out,” said Ballantine. “The van’s been playing up.”

“We’ll have to go into town then.” She sighed. “Is there anything else you need?”

He looked down at his feet. His shoes were dusty and cracked. “No,” he said. “I don’t think so.”

Bella sighed again, more loudly. “Get moving,” she said to Melodie. “Back in the car.”

Melodie’s heart sank. She wouldn’t have minded seeing the town, where her father had said there used to be a naval base and a canning factory, but the thought of

the sweltering car was close to torture. She knew she would be car sick, and the thought of this was more upsetting than the thought of being left alone with Ballantine. She wondered what he would do if that happened, whether he might try to speak to her.

*You don't have to reply if he does,* she thought. *You can sit here in the drive and look at the road.* "I'm boiling," she said. "I want to stay here." She scraped her sandal against the gravel, making a line in the dust like a capital 'i.'

"She'll be all right, Bee," said her father. "We'll only be gone half an hour."

Bella inhaled sharply and seemed on the point of insisting then for some reason changed her mind. "Come here," she said. "I don't want you going into the house." She dug in her handbag and brought out a tube of sunblock. It smelled rank and sulphurous, like the oil in a can of pilchards. Her mother rubbed palmfuls of the stuff into her arms and shoulders and neck. Her hat cast a circular shadow like a hole in the ground.

She held Melodie at arm's length for a moment then nodded and got into the car. Melodie sat down on the stubble and watched the car driving away. She had seldom been left on her own. She wondered what she would do if the car never returned. The thought was terrifying but curiously thrilling and full of possibilities. It seemed to give her a new sense of herself, opening regions of her imagination she had caught glimpses of but never truly inhabited.

She glanced over towards the house. The front door was standing ajar but there was no sign of Ballantine. She thought about the way he had looked at her, a mixture of terror and joy. It was as if he recognised her but she knew this was impossible. Ballantine didn't know her. She had never seen him before in her life.

Suddenly he appeared. He was holding something in his hands, a glass full of some cloudy liquid. He began walking towards her. Melodie felt herself stiffen. She drew her arms up around her knees. Her skin prickled in the heat. She reeked heavily of sunscreen.

He came and stood in front of her.

“Would you like a drink?” he said. “You must be very thirsty.”

She had forgotten her thirst, but the sight of the glass brought it back. Her mouth and throat felt dusty and bone dry. He handed her the glass. It was tall and etched with flowers, cold and almost freezing to the touch. She smelled the tart yellow smell of lemons, making her stomach cramp and then release. The drink was sour-sweet and delicious. It foamed gently against her lips.

“There’s more inside if you’d like some,” he said. “It’s too hot for you to sit out here.”

She drained the glass to its dregs, wondering why Ballantine had not offered the lemonade to her parents. She felt a small shiver of pleasure at the thought that she and Ballantine already had a secret together. Her mother had not wanted her to go in the house, but she had not expressly forbidden it. She stood up and followed him inside.

The hallway was dark and shaded. There were pictures on the walls, enlarged photographs of centipedes and spiders, a bumblebee hovering in midair.

“The bumblebee can’t fly, did you know that?” he said. “Conventional science says it’s impossible.”

“We learned that in school last year,” she said. “What’s your name?”

“My name is Lindsay,” said Ballantine. “What’s yours?”

“Melodie. Melodie Craven.” She had always thought Lindsay was a girl’s name but it suited him anyway. She liked the sound of it, the way the ‘d’ pressed against the ‘s’ as you pushed the tip of your tongue to the back of your teeth.

“Go through,” he said. “I won’t be a moment.”

The main room overlooked the back of the house. Cloth blinds masked the upper parts of the windows, and a wooden ceiling fan, shaped like the propeller of a small aircraft, took off the worst of the heat. There was a long, low couch covered with a tartan blanket, a tall glass-fronted cabinet crammed with books and what looked like the lever arch files that some of her older classmates used for storing their homework. She was aware of an absence of dust. Closest to the window stood a narrow oblong table scattered with a variety of small, shiny objects: glass Petri dishes, triangular flasks filled with translucent liquids, tweezers and a pair of scissors, the narrow blades half-open in a steel-blue ‘v.’ She recognised many of the objects from school, although as an arts prelim she had never been allowed to touch them. She found the object at the centre of the table especially fascinating. It had a long tubular barrel and a viewfinder and was made of some dark, non-reflective metal. There was a platform half-way up, with levers and clips jutting out from it at right angles. The machine looked both interesting and dangerous, reminding her in some fashion of the things in the school medical suite: the heart monitors and dental equipment, the miniature camera that could be inserted into your body through a tube passed down through the throat.

She had once vowed to herself that no-one would ever touch her with those things, that she would die first.

“That’s a microscope,” she said.



“That’s right,” said Ballantine. He had come up behind her with scarcely a sound. Close to he looked younger. He was carrying a tin tray with another glass of lemonade on it and a plate of some oatmeal biscuits. She noticed how thin he was, as if his body as well as the landscape had been eroded by the hot wind and sand. She drained the second glass as quickly as the first although her thirst was less urgent. She replaced it on the tray and out of politeness took one of the cookies. Its texture was gritty, like birdseed, although the taste was not unpleasant. There was a microscope at school, but only a very small number of pupils were allowed to go near it.

“What’s it for?” she said. “The microscope?”

“It’s for exploring the hidden universe,” he said. “The microcosmos. Would you like me to show you how it works?”

She nodded. He was examining her with that strange look again, the look that said he knew her. His expression unnerved her but it excited her too. It made her feel important.

He put the tray down at the end of the bench, then taking a glass pipette he extracted a measure of liquid from one of the vials.

“This is ordinary rain water,” he said. “From the barrels outside.” He nodded towards the window, and Melodie remembered the oil drums lined up along the back of the house. There had been no rain for several weeks. The water in the barrels would be filthy by now, undrinkable without straining and boiling, reduced to a greenish sludge. Ballantine lifted the lid from a long plywood box that looked a little like one of the cigar boxes her father used to store paperclips and other desk stationery. It contained hundreds of small glass rectangles all of an identical size. They reminded her of the massed ranks of lenses in an optician’s window.

Ballantine squeezed a single drop of water from the pipette onto one of the pieces of glass. Then he placed another piece on top of it, a wafer-thin circle the size of a thumbnail.

“That’s the cover slip,” he said. “It holds everything in place. The larger sheet underneath is called a slide.”

He laid the slide on the viewing platform and secured it with the metal clips.

“You’ll need this,” he said. “Here.”

He pulled a high varnished stool from under the table and indicated that she should kneel on it. The wood felt warm and smooth against her knees. She put her eye to the viewfinder. At first there was nothing, just a circular field of brightness, as when you viewed a blank transparency through a light projector. Then suddenly there was movement, a haphazard, frantic scrabbling, as of some small rodent or other verminous animal, a tight burst of energy that seemed somehow to flow in every direction at once.

She gasped and drew away from the viewfinder. The glass slide and its securing clips were undisturbed. What she had seen was impossible, monstrous. She felt a single bead of sweat loosen itself from between her shoulder blades and begin to creep along the runnel of her spine.

“Take your time,” said Ballantine, smiling. “You need to get your eye in.” He reached out and took her hand, placing her fingers on a small grooved disc at the base of the lens. “This adjusts the focus,” he said.

She practised twisting the dial. She could see things in the water, spools of a greenish threadlike substance and bulbous brown spores that Ballantine said were a kind of algae. All these things interested her but it was the other thing she was looking for, the thrashing transparent monstrosity she had glimpsed before. Suddenly it shot

into view. She could see now how it moved, propelling itself along with the spidery, whip-like tentacles that grew along the margins of its body. There were shadowy shapes inside it, coils and wisps of blue and red that could have been veins or some kind of rudimentary internal organs.

The fact of the thing astounded her. She found it difficult to comprehend, that it existed and played out its life, but without the means of the microscope she might never have known it was there.

“What’s it called?” she said to Ballantine.

“A paramecium,” he said. “A slipper animal.”

“Do you think it sees us?” she said. “Does it know it’s trapped under the glass?”

Ballantine moved to stand beside her. His long shadow fell across the microscope, darkening her field of vision. “That’s an interesting question,” he said. “I should think we’re light years from any kind of reasonable answer.” He reached out and touched her hair. It was a kind touch, the merest hint of a caress, but it disturbed her to have him so close. She drew back from his hand, thinking about the slipper animal. It occurred to her that a single barrel of water might contain millions of them; an invisible city, a universe, a microcosmos of unseeable beings.

*What can we know of them?* She thought. *We might never have an answer.*

“Do you know who you look like?” Ballantine said. “You look like your Aunt Chantal.”

Chantal was her mother’s younger sister. Melodie had always known she had an aunt, but Bella had always told her she lived abroad. Then one evening at the end of winter she had come to the house. Melodie had just had time to take in her aunt’s fair head and narrow waist, the black bag she had with her that looked like a doctor’s

bag, and then she had been sent to her room. Downstairs there had been supper and there had been an argument. Her mother had done most of the talking. Melodie had heard her shouting from the top of the stairs.

She knew that Chantal meant singer, that her aunt's name had to do with music, like Melodie's own.

"I've never met her," she said to Ballantine. She put her eye back to the viewfinder. To her surprise there were now two slipper animals. They confronted one another for a moment, then slid noiselessly past, like two buses on a narrow road. The idea that Ballantine knew her aunt somehow was thrilling and dangerous, like something in a spy story. It seemed to bind them together in some mysterious, underground way.

"What will you do with the creatures once we've finished looking at them?"

"I don't know," he said. "What would you like me to do with them?"

"Put them back in the water outside."

"All right," he said. "I will."

"They look like monsters."

"Invisible monsters." He picked up the flask with the rest of the water and held it up to the light. "We're surrounded by them."

There was the sound of a car outside. Ballantine moved quickly away from her and crossed through into the hall. Melodie got down from the stool. She listened to the low, puttering hum of the engine, the slide and crunch of wheels on gravel. There was the sound of a car door slamming and then her mother's voice, raised in anger.

"What have you done with my daughter?"

Ballantine answered, his tone low and measured. She couldn't make out what he said. A moment later her mother appeared. She was wearing the mirror sunglasses

she kept in the glove compartment. They made her look young and hard. It was impossible to gauge her mood.

“I thought I told you not to go in the house?”

“It was hot in the drive,” said Melodie. “Mr Ballantine said it would be safer if I came inside.”

She dropped the word *safer* with a soft thud, the ace she had kept hidden in her hand. Her mother hesitated then shrugged. She turned away then, and Melodie knew she had got away with it, that Bella Craven had decided to let her disobedience go unpunished. She was carrying a nylon string bag, its narrow blue handles twisted about her fingers. The bag was full of provisions. Melodie saw the stained greaseproof paper that meant there was some kind of meat.

The kitchen was a brick-built extension, tacked onto the side of the house like an outside privy or a coal store. There was a concrete floor and a scrubbed pine table, an enormous stained porcelain sink. The fridge was vast and upright, like a steel coffin turned on its end. The inside was stacked with glass jam jars, full of what looked like mud.

“You shouldn’t keep food in here,” said Bella. Red patches stood out on her cheeks.

“It’s perfectly safe,” said Ballantine. “There’s nothing to worry about.”

Bella stepped up to the table and began to unload the provisions. When she turned on the tap above the sink a trickle of brownish water spluttered out. Melodie watched as she rinsed the potatoes and carrots, working at the dirt with the pads of her fingers. She was surprised to see her using the water straight from the tap. At home she boiled everything.

Her father came in from the car carrying two cases of bottled water. He steadied himself against the doorpost, easing one of the cartons onto the floor.

“Don’t leave it there, Doug,” said Bella. “It’ll get in the way.”

The meal was served in the dining room, which was a curtained alcove just off the hallway. The meat was leathery and a little salty but Bella had done her best with it, steeping it in a sauce made from onions and the orange Ceps mushrooms that for some reason had been plentiful in the town. Bella Craven had always been able to make a little go a long way. She prided herself on that fact.

They ate in near-silence. At one point Doug asked Ballantine if he could get a radio signal at the house, and Ballantine said he could, though it was intermittent.

“I don’t really miss it, though,” he said. “Except for the music.”

Melodie finished her food and then asked if she could go to the bathroom. She felt anxious without knowing why. The bathroom was at the end of the hallway, a narrow closet of the old-fashioned type that used a sandbox instead of the new chemicals. Beside the closet a steep flight of steps led to the upper floor. At the top of the stairs was a long landing with a window at either end and two rooms leading off. In one room a large hooded perambulator stood under the window, surrounded by stacks of packing cases. The other contained a large iron bedstead and was obviously where Ballantine slept. There was a photograph on the night stand, a woman with light hair and a birthmark high up on one cheek.

Melodie crept back down the stairs. From the dining room she could hear her mother, her voice lowered but bitter with complaint. Through a gap in the curtain she could see all three of them around the table, the welter of dirty dishes pushed to one side.

“I’m only here because Chantal made me promise,” said Bella Craven. “Don’t you go thinking I like it.”

“Aren’t you going to tell me how she is?” said Ballantine. “I’m presuming you intercepted all my letters.” There was a force of violence in his voice that hadn’t been there before. His eagle’s face looked stricken, his pale eyes coldly crystalline. He leaned forward as he spoke, one hand making a fist.

“She’s recovering, no thanks to you,” said Bella. “She doesn’t want to see you again.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“It’s a wonder she hasn’t gone crazy,” said Bella. “You and your insane life, your foul experiments.” She sounded close to tears. Melodie remembered the last time she had seen her mother cry, when she had run over a cat that had been crossing the road in front of their house. She had screamed at Melodie, who had been in the back seat of the car looking at the road atlas. She liked the road atlas, with its coloured symbols for churches and wind farms and viaducts, the journeys you could go on simply by turning the page.

“Chantal isn’t crazy,” said Ballantine. “She has a brilliant mind, which you have done your best to stifle.”

“Let’s stop this,” said Douglas Craven. “This isn’t going to do any good.” He tried to take his wife’s hand but she pulled it away. “Will you come back with us tonight?” he said to Ballantine. “You’d be much better off in the city. This isn’t a good place to be.”

Ballantine turned to him, his piercing eyes softening a little. “Thank you Doug, but this is my home.”

“This is hopeless,” said Bella. “Vile. I knew we should never have come here. Where in God’s name is Melodie?”

Melodie coughed loudly and came back through the curtain. The three adults turned to look at her.

“We’re leaving,” said Bella. “Get yourself into the car.” She started to clear the table. Doug Craven rubbed at his eyes.

“I’ll just go and check the lights,” he said.

Then it was just the two of them. He stared at her, seemingly entranced. For a second she was afraid he might grab hold of her but at the last minute his resolve appeared to desert him. His hands fell limp to his sides.

“Wait,” he said. “Wait here.” He disappeared into the hall. Melodie waited, listening to the sound of her mother loading the dishes into the steam cleaner. In a few moments Ballantine returned. He held something out to her, a square white envelope. There was no name written on the envelope, though she could feel there was something inside it, several sheets of paper folded in half.

“Will you do something for me?” he said. He leaned forward slightly, putting his face close to hers. “Will you give this to your aunt when you next see her? It doesn’t matter when that is. It doesn’t matter if it’s years from now. Just give her this and tell her it came from me.”

The blue of his eyes was shimmering, lucent, a pale bright turquoise. Melodie took the letter and put it inside her purse. Ballantine touched the top of her head, so gently she could barely feel his hand.

“It’s like seeing her face,” he said. “It’s almost as if you were sent.”

Suddenly her mother appeared. She pulled Melodie against her, snatching at her shoulders and arms. Her hands were damp with steam.



“Into the car,” she said to her. To Ballantine she said nothing at all. Melodie went outside. Her father was standing by the car. As she watched he came over to Ballantine and handed him something, a small bundle that might have been money.

“Think about what I said,” he said. “If you need anything just call.” Then he got into the car. From the back seat Melodie saw him put his hand on his wife’s knee but Bella refused to look at him.

The engine coughed into life. The wheels caught on the gravel and they were away. Melodie gazed back at the house. Ballantine was still standing there, looking towards the car, looking at her. She hugged her red plastic purse and said his name to herself, touching the back of her teeth with the tip of her tongue.

It began to get dark. They drove for more than an hour until at last the lights of the rest stop glimmered up towards them through the dusk. Her father parked the car and they got out. Melodie stood on the cracked tarmac breathing in the smells of diesel and scorched undergrowth. She wondered if Ballantine were still standing there in the doorway, looking out on the bramble and nettles that had once been the lake. She wondered what moved in its depths, what invisible monsters. What secrets that might yet come forth.