



AN EXTRACT FROM

THE LAST
SCARECROW

NEIL J HART



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ERIN

“Brave the rain or die!”

Erin could barely hear Pa’s screams as she frantically helped him fill their tiny rowing boat with essential items for the voyage. Tinned food clattered against the wooden hull, rolling helplessly from side to side, as Erin clambered on board. She threaded her soaking plimsoles between the clattering tins, her arms quivering, her stomach churning.

The rain was impossible. It was more than rain. Erin felt like she was being pounded by an endless wave of frozen needles all the while desperately searching for a lungful of air. She curled forward beneath a lemon-yellow poncho, her arms wrapped around herself as if to keep her flesh and bones in one piece.

Her breath came in short, machine-gun spurts; her heart rattled against her ribs.

Pa fought his way through the shallows as lightning tore the sky in two. He looked exhausted. Dragging one foot onto the shore, he lifted Ma from her wheelchair and helped her into the boat. Rain and tides battered them from all directions. Pa threw the oars to her brother, Clyde— who was sat opposite Erin— before squirming into position. The boat listed dangerously back and forth on the choppy grey water. Foam and spray arced into the air, mixing with the torrential rainstorm.

Erin turned her big green eyes back to the farmhouse at the top of Coldharbour

Hill. It was hidden intermittently behind a thousand sheets of rain and surrounded by the rising, vicious tides. The farm was her home, her happiness, the one thing she'd always known. She'd rather die in the comfort and familiarity of the farmhouse than take this awful risk.

Her father's words tore at her heart again— *Brave the rain or die!*

Die, she thought. *I'd like to die.*

Her mind wiped the storm clouds away, painted the sky a lustrous cerulean and pinned a bright, sparkling sun high above. She imagined Pa traipsing up the cobbled path to the farmhouse after a long day in the fields. Ma was sat in her chair by the doorway waiting for him as Clyde chopped wood and Erin fussed her puppy, Socks, in the yawning entrance to the barn. Reaching the brow of the hill, Pa swept Ma into a wistful embrace, his hands sliding effortlessly around her waist. They kissed momentarily but lingered with their heads no more than inches apart. Erin rolled onto her back as Socks yipped and yammered, bouncing around with youthful exuberance. Clyde embedded the head of his axe into a large wooden block, throwing some cast-offs for the puppy to chase.

Erin loved her life in Coldharbour Farm. She loved her family. She never wanted to grow up. She never wanted anything to change.

The universe had other plans.

Choking grey clouds suffocated the sky, edged with the black of a sickening bruise. The rain came heavier, more determined. It pounded like iron-clad fists breaking down a door. Convinced that the rain would eventually wear away her skin, smash through her skull and drown her brain, Erin grabbed an umbrella and snapped it open. The wind immediately ripped it from her hands and sent it blustering across the waves.

Pa yelled at her— angry, frustrated— but she couldn't hear anything except the endless drilling of rain on her skin and the screams of the wind.

Seizing the oars, her father launched the vessel forward. Clyde mirrored him. Erin's stomach lurched as they undulated with the waves— up, down, up, down, up, down— and panic circled through her as rainwater filled the boat. Ma frantically scooped handfuls over the side, but Erin could tell it was all in vain.

The family struggled for almost an hour, the boat listing back and forth with

growing urgency. Pa forced them onwards— barking like a warlord as his oars lashed the seawater— but the rising tides dragged them back towards the shrinking island. The wind spun them in circles, lifting the boat onto the tips of the waves. Erin felt as though they were flying or trapped on fairground ride that had run amok. With grimaced faces, Pa and Clyde stuck to their task, arms straining, hands bleeding, but the rain and the gathering darkness blinded them, clouding any sense of direction.

Erin shut her eyes again. She pictured herself dragging Pa into the barn by his checkered shirt sleeve. “What do you think of her?” she asked him, dancing excitedly in circles. Her father squinted through the dim light then leant backwards and stared up at her creation. His face was both terrified and immeasurably proud all at once. “She’s— the best one yet,” he told her. “Really?” Erin replied. “The best yet? Scarier than Number Five? More gruesome than Number Eight?” She watched her father’s reaction closely. He nodded grimly, his calloused hands stroking his salt-and-pepper stubble. Looking down at his daughter, he winked. “Yes, Erin. She’s the most horrifying of them all!”

Thunder rumbled in the heavens. The temperature dropped. An icy wind rattled Erin’s bones and the sky became streaked with veins of arctic blue. Something hard and round catapulted through the storm and lashed against Erin’s head. Her vision doubled for a moment— blurred and anxious— a sharp pain lanced her brain.

This is it, she thought, grabbing her head. The storm is going to rend my skull in two and pound me into oblivion.

Her hands returned from the location of the pain, warm and sticky. Pulling them into view, she saw that they were coated with blood. Erin’s stomach twisted at the sight, but she had no time to worry, or panic, or construct any form of warning before she was hit again.

And again.

Pebble-sized balls of ice were battering the water, the boat, her family. Blood— almost pink in colour, diluted by the merciless rain— ran down their faces.

But the hailstorm was just getting started.

Deadly ice began to grow in size, punching Erin on the shoulders, the legs

and arms, until she crumpled to the floor. She pulled her knees to her chest and shuddered uncontrollably. Clyde fell forward and lay across her, taking the worst of the hail on his back. The sound of it lashing into Clyde's flesh was almost too much for her to bear. Erin squinted at him between the slatted wooden seats, her hands covering her ears. His face hung just above hers, twisted in agony. Blood and rain dripped from his soaking hair, clothes, crooked smile. He whispered something that could equally have been *Don't worry* or *Goodbye* or *I love you* but Erin still couldn't hear a thing.

She closed her eyes.

Clyde loved Dragons. And Lego. His room was a shrine to both. When they were younger, Erin and Clyde would play together building castles and small-holdings, developing languages, a rich mythology and a royal family of which they were Prince and Princess to a loving King and Queen and worshipped the mighty Dragon above all else. But, as they grew older, Clyde turned his attention to constructing a mighty army and machines of war, while Erin focused on farming and the concerns of her Lego citizens. Playtime became fractured. Clyde's warmongering decimated all and incited a frustrated rage inside his sister. He continued to play alone, while Erin caught jealous snatches of his endeavours through the crack in his doorway. Eventually, she turned her creative flare to something else.

Something— darker.

Lurching, the boat spun and the world turned upside down. Her brother went flying, disappearing into a wall of spray and ice. The boat capsized, trapping Erin beneath. Her toes turned to ice almost immediately, the sensation moving up her legs like the crawl of some insidious poison. Reaching up, she threaded her bloodied arms around the splintered wooden seat that now hung above. The tang of salt and copper slithered on her tongue. Her teeth ached from clenching. Her body felt like it didn't belong to her any more.

Die, she thought again. *I'd like to die*.

Erin could hear her mother scream— something desperate and wild.

Her father's voice yelled a strangled response.

They sounded muffled.

Distant.

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Lost.

Erin closed her eyes and prayed that when she opened them they would be next to her, bobbing in the dark waters, protected from the storm. She began counting. It was something her mother had taught her to do when she was upset or afraid.

“Just count to one hundred dear and the pain will wash away,” Ma said, as she hunkered down in front of Erin. Blood oozed from a nick on her palm. “It’s hurts so bad,” she moaned. “Just count.” Erin silently ran through the numbers in her head. “How did you do this?” Ma went on, dabbing the wound with balled-up cotton wool dipped in antiseptic. Erin squealed. “Keep counting.” She did and, as the numbers rose, the pain began to slip away. Erin glanced down at her hand. A course, pinkish plaster was pressed over the cut; a dull ached lingered beneath. “I caught it on one of Number Eight’s rusty nails,” Erin admitted. Ma shook her head disapprovingly, yet a playful smile danced on her lips.

1 ... 2 ... 3 ... The deadly hail drummed on the bottom of the upturned boat.

18 ... 19 ... 20 ... Erin’s arms promised to let go but she held fast, picturing the faces of her family on the back of her eyelids.

45 ... 46 ... 47 ... She wondered about the things that lurked in the turbulent waters below her; frightened things with empty stomachs and deadly teeth.

72 ... 73 ... 74 ... She thought of the farmhouse and the safety that it offered, the barns and the stables and the scarecrows that guarded the fields all around.

98 ... 99 ... A boulder of ice, the size of a human head, tore through the hull of the boat with a sickening *Crack!* It missed Erin’s face by inches and plunged into the frothing grey swell.

100 ... She opened her eyes.



~ 2 ~

TWELVE

It rained for years. No-one knew how long because everyone was dead.

Well, almost everyone.

Upon a wooden cross, weathered and worn by the savagery of the Many Years Storm, hung a scarecrow. Rotating her mighty bison's skull for the first time, she looked down at herself and smiled a long, toothy grin.

The scarecrow wore a long, elegant dress made of the deepest, emptiest, black velvet that you can imagine. Over the dress was a dirty red pirate jacket. It had wide lapels studded with metal buttons and long arms with double-folded cuffs inlaid with gold thread and silk. Most of the coat was splatted with mud and bird excrement and was worn at the shoulders where the scarecrow's angular struts pushed against the fabric. On the end of her left arm, which was made from an old broomstick, she wore a yellow rubber glove, packed with sodden straw, tightened at the wrist with tape. Her right arm was covered in a full-length fancy-dress demonic arm, complete with red leather-effect skin and long black fingernails. The ends of her wooden legs were plunged into a pair of old boots, packed and hardened with cement. Mounted upon her broad, rigid shoulders sat the enormous bison's skull, cracked and damaged. Sharp horns jutted out of either side and a long jaw, armed with discoloured teeth hung toward her chest. But most disturbing of all were the hundreds of worms, bugs, flies and maggots that wriggled about in her eye sockets.

She marvelled at her attire, the awkward construction of her body, her surroundings, and the astonishing fact that she was, for want of a better explanation, *alive*.

The scarecrow noticed a small yellow badge pinned to the lapel of her dirty red pirate jacket. It read— *I Am 12*.

“Hello, Twelve,” she said to herself. “It’s very nice to meet you.”

The bindings that had once held Twelve to her cross were now frayed and ruined. She moved her arms forward and they fell to the ground with ease. Her back inched away from the cross and— not entirely sure of the correct procedure for operating her body— fell skull first into the mud.

She lay there for a moment attempting to feel her joints and limbs. After a time, she climbed to her feet and stood, wobbling, at the foot of her cross. Twelve’s cross was positioned on the side of a hill surround by an endless grey ocean. Several domes of land poked out of the water in the middle distance but they held nothing of note.

Except one.

Far away, perhaps half a mile or more across the water, was a heap of land that contain a small brick building. Next to the building stood a cross. It looked a lot like Twelve’s. And this one, too, was now empty.

The sky above, like the sea below, was grey and pale. A faint yellow hue struggled to shine through the dimness and failed to light the world as it once had. Clouds were gone now. Exiled, perhaps. All that remained was a suffocating greyness that felt close and distant all at once.

Twelve turned. Behind the cross, where she had stood facing the sea for many years, sat a farmhouse, a stable and a barn. They looked as if they had seen better days. Sections of the roof were missing, corrugated iron walls bowed towards the ground, and windows panes were either smashed or hung lose in their brackets. Twelve wrenched her boots out of the mud and stalked awkwardly towards a cobbled path that led uphill. The cobbles were beaten and worn something horrible— upturned, cracked and broken.

She stumbled along the path, leaving muddy bootprints in her wake. A sign hung lopsidedly beside the farmhouse door with the words *Coldharbour Farm*

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painted upon it by a child's hand. The door was open so Twelve ducked her massive horned head and entered.

Inside, the farmhouse had been ransacked. A large oak table was still standing, although it had been shoved diagonally across the kitchen. All the chairs were upended, jars and tins and cupboards opened and plundered. Cooking utensils and cutlery lay dirty and discarded in the basin, on the table and across the floor. A dog bowl with the word *Socks* etched on it sat bare at the foot on the stairs. Flies circled it, descending and retreating with nothing to show for their efforts.

Twelve wandered into the sitting room and climbed the narrow stairs. She discovered that the entire house had been subjected to the same destructive chaos.

Outside, it was quiet. The rhythm of the sea was all she could hear.

That, and the sound of the dead bodies washing up against the shore.

* * *

Twelve stood at the edge of water and watched the corpses bobbing in the sea. There must have been hundreds. Perhaps, thousands. "Where have you come from?" she asked the dead.

The rotten bodies of men, women, children and all manner of animals, made their way towards the shore with solemn intent— a gruesome armada of death and putrefaction. Twelve dragged her cement-filled boots along the shoreline for a while. After completing a lap of the island, she stopped and kicked one of the bodies over. He was a young man, with dirty blonde hair and freckles. His face was bloated, pale and filled with salt water. It looked like an engorged balloon ready to burst. He was still and silent, cold and heavy. Twelve wondered whether he was about to wake up— as she had done— but he just lay there, motionless, his eyes marbled and faraway.

"He's dead," came a small voice from behind her.

Twelve almost slipped and fell in the mud again. Regaining her balance, she swivelled and stared at a small blackbird perched on her cross. "Who are you?" she asked, striding over.

The blackbird seemed to shrug. "The name's Raven."

“You look more like a blackbird,” she said, as she got closer.

“Not that it matters a jot, but I *am* a blackbird,” he told her. “My *name* is Raven.”

“Raven’s are quite a bit bigger, are they not?”

“Yes. I know they are,” the blackbird replied hotly. “Again— it’s just my name.”

“Why?” Twelve said, shaking her colossal head.

Raven croaked and ruffled his wings. “I think it’s my sunny disposition.”

Twelve looked back at the lifeless boy on the shore. “Dead, you say?”

“Yep, dead as dead can be. Dead as doornails, as dodos, as yesterday. Drowned, most probably. If the hail didn’t bash his brains in first,” the blackbird said.

“The hail?” Twelve asked.

“Yeah,” Raven replied. “From the storm.” He cocked his little head to one side.

“The Many Years Storm?”

Twelve gave him a blank look. To be honest, it was hard to do much else with a bison’s skull for a face.

“You don’t know much, do you?” the blackbird sighed.

“I’m surprised I know anything at all,” she told him. “I mean, what am I?”

“You’re a scarecrow,” Raven told her.

“Oh,” Twelve replied. “That makes sense— what with the cross and all.”

“What did you think you were?”

The scarecrow paused. “No idea. I just woke up.”

“Quite so,” Raven nodded. “I was soaring across the Endless Blue and I noticed your cross without you on it and I thought to myself— *Now, that’s new*. So, I came down to see what’s what.”

“The Endless Blue?”

“The ocean and the sky,” Raven replied. “My fellow winged friends and I call it so.” He seemed to shrink a little. “At least, we used to.”

Twelve looked out across the water again. “Yes, it’s more a sort of—”

“—Endless Grey? A Pale Infinity?” Raven muttered. “Yes, yes, yes. The blue has sort of— gone.”

Twelve stared at the pale orb that had once been the sun. “I remember the water, and the sun, and the sky,” she said. “I don’t know why.”

“You’ve been facing the Endless Blue your entire life,” he told her. “Stands to

reason that some part of it came with you.”

“But I’ve just woken up,” Twelve said. “Haven’t I?”

The blackbird hopped off the cross and swooped across the muddy earth. He landed expertly on Twelve’s shoulder, chirping merrily. He had a smooth coat, with bright eyes and a sharp lemon-yellow beak. Tucking his wings in, he said, “Who knows? Look, one minute I’m in an egg and the next I’m in a nest fighting for regurgitated worms. Life is a desperate, impossible thing.”

“Raven?” Twelve said. “What happened to all these people?”

“The Many Years Storm,” he said.

“A storm killed these people?” she said, looking at the boy by the shore and the desolation that moved towards her on the waves.

“No,” Raven replied. “It killed *everyone*.”

* * *

Twelve was almost two months old when the rain came. She had been secured to the cross in early summer and left there to look out over the distant hills and valleys. Around her swayed a bountiful, undulating field of ripe yellow corn and twisting green shoots. Sunlight bathed the scarecrow as she hung there in her beautiful black velvet dress, cement-filled boots and bright red pirate jacket.

Twelve was the most frightening of all the scarecrows at Coldharbour Farm. Everyone agreed. If there was a competition for *Most Terrifying Scarecrow On Planet Earth*, Twelve was a solid bet. Her creator had really honed her craft. There was no other scarecrow that could make your skin crawl quite like Number Twelve.

Well, perhaps one.

It started with an innocent rain shower. The kind you see every week. The kind that barely needs a raincoat, much less an umbrella. But the rain shower began one day and didn’t stop. After a few days, the soil flooded, destroying the crops that it had once nourished. Throughout this, Twelve remained on her cross. A cruel wind whipped at her, the rain drenched her, the cold sank into her clothes and fixtures and fittings. The cross yawned back and forth in its housing, the thick wooded struts creaking beneath her cement-filled boots and her broad, rigid back. Leaves

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blew up from the fields below. Some stuck to her clothes while others scattered beyond the cross like fleeing rats.

After a month, a thin line of blue appeared on the horizon. The sea was rising, spreading inland towards Coldharbour Farm. Giving up on their crops, the farmer and his family retreated up the hill, barricaded themselves inside the farmhouse and prayed that the storm would pass.

One month became two.

Two became three.

Three became four.

The farmer, in his panic, abandoned the safety of the farmhouse and drove his family down to the waters edge. Loading a small vessel with their worldly belongings, they climbed aboard and launched themselves out to sea.

But the farmer and his family were dealt a cruel twist of fate. The rain changed that day. It became thicker, heavier, more powerful. The water lurched and pounded the small rowing boat. Hail came then. Sickening fists of ice rained down on them until it capsized, spilling the farmer and his family into the treacherous, freezing sea.

Lightening cracked the sky. Clouds turned black. The hailstorm raged on. Blocks of ice the size of cars and tractors fell into the churning sea. It was the end of all things, and it lasted for years and years and years.

“You saw it happen?” Twelve interrupted, as Raven told the story.

“From a distance,” he replied. “Across the way. In the eaves of the barn. I saw the family go out, the storm close in and the boat overturn. The bodies soon started appearing. Hundreds and hundreds of them. Must be from all over the place. Towns, farms, cities. From the valleys and lowlands between here and where the coast used to be.”

Twelve was sat in an armchair in the farmhouse. She looked uncomfortable, awkward. Her knees— which, like all her joints, were fashioned from old tractor parts— were bent up to meet her chin, her arms spilling onto the floor. “So, what happened after the storm?”

“Well,” Raven looked around. “The clouds vanished and the sun turned pale. The Endless Blue became flat and calm— withered and grey like old skin. It’s only

been a few weeks but I'm still not used to the sound."

"What sound?" the scarecrow asked.

"Exactly," he replied. "Compared to the storm— there isn't any."

Twelve took a moment to consider the blackbird's words. "All the humans are gone. And I'm alive. And you're a talking bird." She stopped and then added, "How did all this happen?"

"You're asking me?" Raven said. "I'm not a God. Neither am I a meteorologist. I'm just a blackbird. It's a wonder I survived at all."

"But you can talk," Twelve pressed.

"So can you—" Raven replied, "—and walk and think and ask questions."

"It's— curious," she said.

"That's one word for it," Raven scoffed. "Another would be strange— or disconcerting— or nefarious!"

Twelve eased back in the armchair but ended up looking even more cramped. A picture window sat to her left. Beyond the glass were the fringes of the island. A pale light spread across the sky, punctuated with a milky-white sun and flickering distant stars. It was neither day nor night, morning nor evening. "Was it always this way?" she asked. "Before the storm, I mean."

Raven flew across the room and perched on Twelve's skull. He turned his little head to the window. "It was better before," he said. "And worse."

"How do you mean?"

"The world was a varied mix of colours and sounds and smells. Some places had crystal blue skies, lush green grass, clear water and golden sandy beaches. Picture perfect. Other places were cold and dark. Hard, bitter places where nothing grew and no-one smiled. But now it's all grey. It's neither one thing nor the other. The world has been washed clean. Or bleached away."

Twelve shook her head. It creaked. "That makes me so sad," she said.

"Why?" Raven said. "You were never there."

"I can— *feel* something of that world," she told him.

The blackbird fidgeted restlessly. "Impossible," he said.

Twelve reached up and took the bird in her rubber hand. She brought him down in front of her ghastly face. A worm slithered from her eyes socket and landed on

her lap. “Nothing is impossible,” she said. “Look at us. This is a new world. One in which a scarecrow and a blackbird have become friends and sit discussing the nature of all that they have inherited.”

Raven rocked back on his tail. “Inherited?”

“Yes,” she said. “This is our world. Our pale, ashen, grey world. And this shall be my home. I was made here. I can think of nowhere I’d rather be!” Twelve gazed out the window again. For an instant, she wondered what was out there beyond the islands and the dead bodies. But she liked the farmhouse, the courtyard outside, the water that lapped at the islands edges and the cold sky that hung above. She felt connected to it. Drawn to it. There was no need to go anywhere else. Her slithering eyes found the blackbird. “Where do you live?”

“Here and there,” he said spreading his wings helpfully. “I’m pretty mobile.”

“Oh, right. Of course. Wings sound like a lot of fun,” Twelve considered.

“Flying scarecrows?” Raven shook his head. “Whatever next?”

“Tell me about the world beyond this one. The places over the horizon. The places I’ll never see.”

Raven gazed through the glass. “There’s a place where the birds live. Not all of them, but hundreds of us, maybe thousands,” he explained. “We call it Clifftop. But it’s way, way, way out beyond the Island of Trees.”

“Clifftop,” she whispered, her mind imaging what a refuge for thousand of birds might look like. After a moment Twelve sat forward in wonder. “The Island of Trees?”

“It’s all in the name,” Raven said, almost bored. “An island, much like this one, except about ten or twenty times the size. Bit more hilly. Covered with trees.”

“And?” Twelve said urgently.

“There’s not much to tell. The Island of Trees was probably the tip of some great mountain forest. Evergreens still stand at the top, lush and full. The bones of dead trees weave here and there and linger in the shallows. Some birds say they’ve witnessed smoke billowing from the centre of the island. Thick, dark smoke. And the smell of fire. The crack of splintering wood.”

If Twelve’s eyes could have spread wide in astonishment then they would have done. “Someone lives there,” she decided.

“Possibly, possibly,” Raven said, nestling down and folding his wings around himself.

“Where else?” she urged. “There must be more places.”

“I’ve never been beyond Clifftop,” he said, indicating his small wings again. “But I’ve heard gulls, eagles, albatross and what-have-you’s mutterings about strange and distant places that were high enough to survive the rising tides.”

Twelve’s interest didn’t wane. “Perhaps others survived the Many Year Storm. Maybe there are other types of birds there, or people, or even scarecrows like me.”

“No-one’s like you,” Raven said. “Not that I’ve ever seen.”

“I can’t be the last scarecrow,” Twelve said, disheartened. “That would be heart-breaking.”

There was a sudden commotion in the kitchen— a frying pan clattered to the flagstones. Twelve sprang from her chair which toppled backwards and crashed into a sideboard. Raven dived off her head before being crushed into the ceiling and swept across the room, wings beating frantically.

“Who’s there?” cried Twelve, striding purposefully, her boots thundering on the wooden floor. She swung her horrifying face into the kitchen. A scrawny, wild-looking girl squealed with fright and vanished through the farmhouse door.