

“I was instantly fascinated by *Bright and Dangerous Objects*, which uses the backdrops of undersea welding and a hypothetical expedition to Mars to deftly explore ideas of independence, grief, motherhood, and romantic relationships and how they shape one woman’s life. . . . This is an original, inventive, and incredibly enjoyable book. I loved it.”

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“*Bright and Dangerous Objects* is written in a beautiful voice—it’s warm, self-deprecating, lonely. The characters face impossible decisions, and they face them the way we all do, wildly, blindly. It’s a book I’ll remember.”

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“Mackintosh has written a beauty. If you’ve ever weighed two different eternities in your hand and had to choose which to love most, this book is yours.”

—DEB OLIN UNFERTH, author of *Barn 8*

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**BRIGHT
AND
DANGEROUS
OBJECTS**

ANNELIESE MACKINTOSH



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For Apollo and Socrates

To light a candle is to cast a shadow. . .

—URSULA K. LE GUIN, *A Wizard of Earthsea*

1

“It’s incredible,” I tell James. “I’m sitting here with you, but I’m looking light-years away.”

We’re at St. Agnes Head, one of the best Dark Sky sites in Cornwall. “Some of these stars no longer exist,” I say. “They’re already dead.”

James takes a swig of whisky.

The moon is in its first-quarter phase. If I keep the binoculars steady, I can make out grey patches on its surface. They’re lava plains, but early astronomers mistook them for oceans, so they’ve got wonderful names: Sea of Serenity, Sea of Crises, Sea That Has Become Known.

“This place is so quiet,” James says. “Hard to believe how much has happened on the ground under our feet. You know, St. Agnes Head was once an artillery range?”

“Wow,” I say. “I’ve found Mars.” Somehow, in spite of my interest in space, I’ve always managed to miss Mars. But here it is, completely unmistakable, a tarnished two-pence piece in the sky.

James walks away from me.

“Don’t you want to see it?”

“In a minute. You know, this heathland is an ideal habitat for spiders.”

It’s almost pitch black, so I’m not sure how James is expecting to see spiders, but he gets like this after a few drinks. Finds himself a preposterous mission to embark on. I suppose we’re alike in that respect.

I point the binoculars southwards again, but Mars has disappeared. It doesn’t help that I’m shivering, and when the lenses shake, the sky looks like television static. I take a bottle of peppermint vodka out of my pocket. I first tried this when we visited the Arctic Circle two years ago. It’s become our tradition when we go stargazing now: James with his whisky, me with my mint vodka.

“Do you remember that trip to Finland?” I ask. “When we saw the Perseid meteor shower?”

“I do.” James heads back towards me. “I wonder how many meteors we saw that night. One, two hundred? We ate reindeer.”

“I’d forgotten about the Rudolph steaks.”

James sits beside me, on the rug we’ve laid down in a gap between the gorse bushes. “Where’s this planet, then?”

“I’ve lost it.”

The fleece of James’s collar brushes my neck. “You’ll find it, sweetheart.”

I could suggest we take our clothes off, right here and now, in the freezing January night. We could get horny and hypothermic.

“Shouldn’t have taken my eyes off it.” I’m not sure why my brain makes me say this. Why it doesn’t suggest sex.

“I’m pleased with these.” James taps the binoculars. He recently inherited them from his great-grandfather. A relic, originally used on a German U-boat in the Second World War. Last year, we went to Bodmin Moor with a telescope so complicated we spent the entire time gazing at an instruction manual.

“Wait. I’ve got it.” I can’t see any of the features, obviously—the craters or polar caps—but I can see enough to make me feel light-headed. Without moving, I ask, “Do you think there’s life up there?”

James sniffs. “It’s entirely possible there’s some bacteria.”

“I hope we discover that bacteria in our lifetime.”

“Discover it? We’ll be living alongside it.”

“Do you really think so?”

“Well, there’s that competition. Where the prize is to go and live on Mars.”

“Liar.” I elbow James in the ribs.

“I’m serious. Heard a thing about it on the radio. The winners are flying out there in a few years—but the catch is that they can never come back.”

“Why not?”

“Money. Technology. Sensationalism.”

I blink, trying to get Mars back into focus, wondering how it might feel to call that place home.

“James,” I say, with an urgency that surprises me. “Don’t you think it might be fun to enter?” I unscrew the lid of my vodka. “We could end up living on Mars together! It’d be so romantic.”

“Ha,” James responds. “I’m not sure that’s my idea of romance.”

I screw the lid back on my bottle, suddenly not thirsty. “Yeah. I was just kidding.”

“We should head back to Falmouth soon,” James yawns. “Before Bolster eats us for breakfast.”

Legend has it that Bolster was a murderous giant from these parts. One day, he fell in love with a young woman called Agnes. Agnes was aware of Bolster’s cruel nature and decided to play a trick on him. She told him to prove his affection for her by filling a hole in the clifftops with his blood. What Bolster didn’t know was that the hole had a crack in it, which ran all the way down to the sea. He took a knife and sliced open his veins, spilling his vital fluids into the unfillable chasm until, finally, he bled out.

“Solvig? Are you ready to go?”

“I will be,” I say. “Very soon.” I take one last look at the planet, then pass James the binoculars. “Go on. It beats spiders.”

As James scans the sky, I can feel the blood draining out of me, flowing towards that red dot in the sky, then spilling out into the darkness.