

*Iona Geddes scours the shoreline daily; she is a collector of bits of bone, decomposed birds, single shoes, fossilised rocks and recently, rucksacks washed ashore. She hears the news of dinghies capsizing, of seventy, eighty, one hundred and twenty people drowning. It is beyond her ken how desperate folk are, that they would flee on an inflatable raft, bobbing on a choppy sea, with changeable weather conditions, in the pitch dark. The stench of oil and body odour and piss. Huddled, cowered and stripped of voice.*

*When she found the first bag, it was a flimsy, neon green thing with meshing. She calls this Bag One, Baby Essentials. She pictures the mamma to have long dark hair, a rope coiled down her back. That she is late teens, that the pregnancy was a surprise, that she had a pain one morning. Thought it was her appendix. She wouldn't have a need for ovulation charts, for peak optimum fertility, for folic acid and temperature checks. This mamma straps baby Sofia (for she would be a Sofia, a sigh of a name) to her chest in a papoose. Takes her to school, where the girls coo and fuss and cluck around. Sofia is a shuddering bundle of heat and milk and whimpers. This baby has fallen asleep to the sound of shell, air raid siren and wailing. The mamma's cousin heard about a man who knew a man who had a plan. The kitchen at night was a hotchpotch of boiling pots of sticky rice, of cigarette smoke and fast voices. It had been brewing for months. It was time to pack a bag. There were rules. It had to be light. It had to be essential items only. It may be flung overboard, to reduce cargo weight.*

*Iona has recorded the contents in a moleskin notebook with all her noticings. That's what she calls them. Noticings. Bag one- Baby Essentials: one cloth hat for baby; one tube of nappy rash cream; one bottle of gripe water; one dummy; four nappies; baby's vaccination card: two tampons; one jar of baby food; a pair of leather booties with seahorses stitched on.*

*It strikes Iona that it is mainly for baby. For Sofia. How does that even feel? To surrender yourself so entirely to this tiny being.*

Dane says that Iona overthinks. It will happen. Not to make such a thing of it. Hey, they are in their mid- thirties, that his spermatozoa are super swimmers. That her ova will be of prime stock. Iona recoils at Dane's terminology. She has googled that her egg supply is diminishing. That a girl is born with a certain number of eggs. How many are left?

She told no-one when she found bag one. Emptied out the contents on the shed floor, took a photo on her phone. Scrolled through the BBC news feed for recent boat sinkings or arrivals. The lottery of the voyage. Wiping the items with a Cure t-shirt of Dane's, she returned them to the bag, zipped it up. Stored in in her art box memorabilia where she has old wallpaper books, fur collars, black and white photos she picks up from charity shops, home décor magazines and broken instruments. She is a hoarder, according to Dane. You mean artist, she says. Or would-be-artist is she didn't have to work full time, clean the house, do the shopping and check up on her father evenings and weekends. Dane cooks and for that Iona is thankful.

At work, she thinks of the bag. If the mother is in a hotel room, with beer-soaked carpet, mushrooms growing on the windowsill and patches of damp like maps of Africa on the ceiling. Kitted out in second hand joggers and sweatshirt with a logo blazoned on. If Sofia can roll onto her front, clap her hands, make mumma, dudda sounds. How tiny her fingernails will be. Wee pink shells. Or if mother and child are laid out in drawers in a mortuary, their flesh mottled and sea-ravaged.

They are at a doctor's appointment when Iona has a seed of an idea. She will search the beach, for more bags. Make art with their possessions. The things which mattered, when they fled. It will be a memorial piece to the unknown.

It had been Dane's idea. That maybe, just maybe they should see about things. Check things out. You know, it would do no harm.

Iona stares at him now, sat in the doctor's office. How he moves his hands as he speaks, clears his throat when he is nervous. The smell of his skin. Peppery aftershave and being outdoors on his bike. How he renews the house insurance

annually and plants her father's vegetables every spring. How he has bought a book on parenting which he hid under a loose floorboard on the landing.

They are reassured that they are doing all the right things but, yes maybe with the length of time, testing could be done. To be thorough and see what is going on. Inside.

Dane treats her to lunch in a new Lebanese restaurant, they had been meaning to go to for ages. They order red wine, sod-it, a day off from strict eating and no alcohol. Iona is that spacey way she becomes when her mind is on Art.

Dane clasps her hands. 'It will be okay. You'll see. We'll have the tests, take it from there. There are other options. If needs be.'

Iona nods, itches to return to the beach.

Seven days later she spies three bags on the rocks. Bag two she names Syrian Boy. Contents: one rosary; one broken watch; Syrian flag; Palestinian charm; mobile phone and Syrian sim card (wrapped in clingfilm); one t- shirt; one pair of jeans; one pair of pants.

She names him Lakuna. It was the first name which came to mind. He is sixteen, had lost his father in the war, had kept his watch as a keepsake. His mother is religious and slipped the rosary in the bag. His brother had said it would be better to die. What was the point? Lakuna likes football, gaming, playing the guitar and wants to own a Ducatti motorbike. He is that skinny-skinny way of a teenage boy and has developed alopecia and eczema. His mother slaps him every time he picks at his skin. He has a fear of loud noises and on occasions still wets the bed. He fancies the girl next door and writes poems, in secret.

Iona knows that Dane wants a boy. That he plans to take him to football games, to buy him a miniature football shirt with his surname printed on the back. He will attach a child bike seat to his Cannondale. That he will cycle along the prom, tell him facts about the tides and the moon and point out the rock pools and where to find the best crabs. Dane will paint his bedroom a sage green colour and spend

hours pouring over Ikea Flatpack instructions for a book shelf and chest of drawers. Dane will blast out the Foo Fighters and jiggle the baby on his hip.

Whilst Dane is finding out sperm test results at the clinic, Iona lays out a sheet of tarpaulin on the grass. She places Baby Sofia's and Syrian Boy's possessions in rows. Bag three she names Parents. It contains an assorted box of waterproof plasters, bandages, germ spray, medication, money, a photo of an elderly couple, one bottle of water, one bar of dark chocolate and ID cards. Their names are Leon and Ambessa Fernando. They are in their forties. Iona stares at their grainy images. The elderly couple were her mother's parents who had urged them to go. To take their chance. That they had lived their lives. That they would remain. Ambessa had wept when she left, breathed in her mother's scent of rose water and baking bread. They had chosen not to have children. They had married late in life, were happy in their careers. She is a translator; he is a civil engineer.

Bag four was ripped and empty, with a picture of Pikachu on the front. She would find items to fill this, call it Missing Girl. Trawl the charity shops, buy some toys, felt pens, books. Belongings a child would covet.

It has been stormy. Good. The beach will be strewn with tree debris and rivery bits. Iona will scavenge for a piece of driftwood she likes the shape of, lug it home and drill holes where she will nestle the baby hat, seahorse booties, rosary beads, Syrian flag, photo of the elderly couple and a miniature wooden doll. She'll spray it in gold and tie on bunches of wild flowers from her father's garden. Cut up bits of fabric and weave them on. Add in photos from magazines as she conjures up the person's life before they fled. That's how it is described in news bulletins. Folk fleeing for their lives.

In Mexico there is a tradition where they honour the dead. A day of celebration and joy. Dane could cook. A large pot of chilli on a bonfire. He will be pleased that she was taking her mind off Trying To Conceive. That's what it has become now. A chore to be ticked off. On a par with decluttering the attic; re-painting the kitchen and grouting the bathroom tiles.

*She scribbles a note. Gone Beach Wanders. She pauses. What to say? He will know by now. Insisted he go alone. He was like that. Insular. Liked to process things in his own way. Take his time. Bit by bit. Iona was a blurter, tended to catastrophise. Her father said she was a bit full on. A Drama Queen.*

*Join me. XXX*

*She rolls up her leggings, slips off sandals, wades into the sea. Gasps at the coldness. There is a rhythm as she trudges. The push and pull of the water. It is hypnotic. Stills the whirring in her mind. Slows it all down. Breathe Iona, breathe. She tilts her head up to the sky, peers out to the horizon, scanning for boats and dinghies and rafts. Pictures the teenage mums and Sofias, Syrian boys, childless couples and unknown girls. Their rucksacks clutched in their hands. Goose bumped skin. Willing it to be okay.*

*Iona hears Dane call her name. She turns. He waves, sprints towards her.*