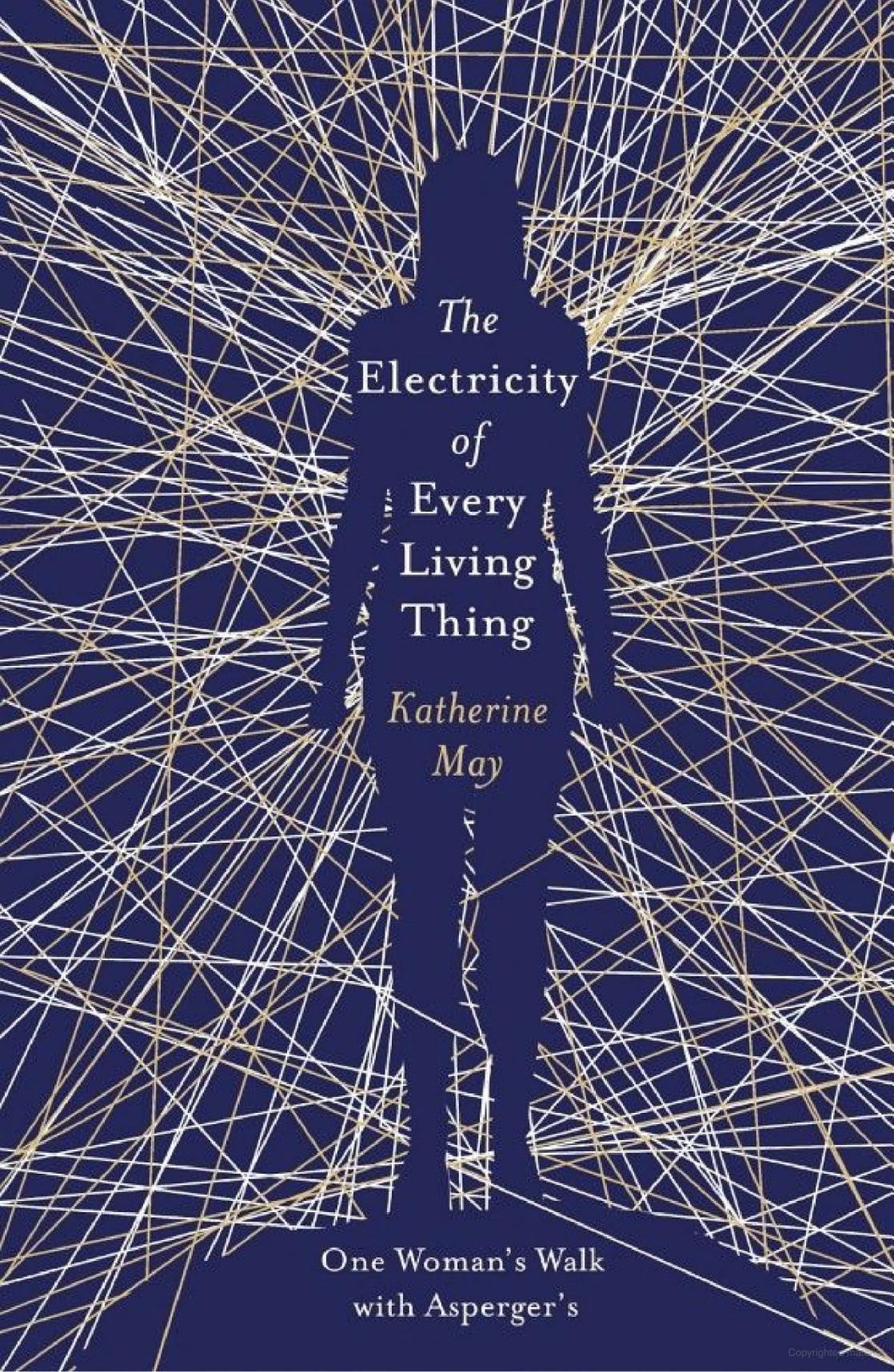
The Electricity of Every Living Thing
Katherine May
One Woman's Walk with Asperger's

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'The universe is full of magical things patiently waiting for our wits to grow sharper.'
Eden Phillpotts, *A Shadow Passes*

'. . . walking too far too often too quickly is not safe at all. The continual cracking of your feet on the road makes a certain quantity of road come up into you.'
Flann O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*

A Note on Chapter Illustrations:

The lines at the beginning of each chapter plot the shape of my walking route.

Prologue

The Isle of Thanet, November

Late afternoon in November, and it's dark already. I'm driving. To my left is the sea at Westgate; to my right, the low sweep of Pegwell Bay. Not that I can see either of them in the gloom, but I know this stretch of road well. The land feels spacious when the sea's nearby, and this is the furthest tip of Kent, the jutting hound's nose where you're suddenly surrounded by water.

I'm late. I hate being late. I switch on the radio for company. A man is interviewing a woman. She is talking about the intensity of everything around her; the way all her senses are heightened to light, noise, touch and smell. They make her anxious. I turn on the windscreen wipers and clear myself two arcs in the drizzle. She finds people hard to understand; she would prefer it if they said what they meant. *Too true*, I think. *Good luck with that.*

Then the interviewer says that his son is on the autism spectrum too, and he needs to write everything down or else he won't be able to take it in, and I think, *Yes but I'm like that, too.* I hate plans made on the hoof; I know I won't remember them. I can't ever recall names unless I see them in writing. Mind you, I can't remember faces, either. People just fade in and out of the fog, and I often have no sense of whether or not I've met them before. My life consists of a series of clues that I leave in diaries, and address books, and lists, so that I can reorient myself every time I forget.

It's like that for everyone, though. We're all just trying to get by.

'All autistic people suffer from a degree of mind-blindness. Is that true of you?' asks the interviewer.

'To some extent,' says the woman. 'I'm better at it than when I was young, because I'm more conscious of it as an issue. I'm constantly searching for clues in people's faces and tone of voice and body language.' *Thank God for my social skills*, I think. *Thank God I can get on with anyone.* There's a twinge of discomfort there, as I push away the sense of what that costs me, of how artificial it all feels. *I am good at this*, but I have to qualify it with *nowadays.*

'By and large, do you tend to think visually more than you think in language?' he says.

'Yes,' says the woman, 'I have an eidetic memory.'

I certainly don't have one of those. Although I suppose I do remember whole pages of books sometimes, like an imprint on my eyelids. At school, my French teacher laughed as I recalled pages of vocabulary: 'You're cheating!' she said. 'You're just reading that from the inside of your head.' And me, at thirteen, squirming in my seat, because I couldn't work out if this was a compliment – in which case, I should laugh along – or an accusation.

'Were you interested in other children, as a child?' says the man.

'No, I just didn't see the point. When I got a bit older, I would try to play with other people, but I wouldn't get it right. By the time I got to seventeen I had a breakdown, because I couldn't deal with all the stuff that was going on.'

The memory surges up of those blank days when I thought I might just give up talking for ever, because the words seemed too far away from my mouth; of the red days when I would hit my head against the wall just to see the white percussive flashes it brought; of the sick, strange days when the drugs made everyone else say I was nearly back to my old self again, but I could feel them in my throat, tamping

everything down so that it didn't spew back up . . .

'One cliché about autism is that romantic relationships are very, very difficult,' he says. 'You're married. How did courtship work for you?'

. . . And I find myself nearly spitting at the radio, saying, out loud, 'How fucking dare you? We're not completely repellent, you know . . .'

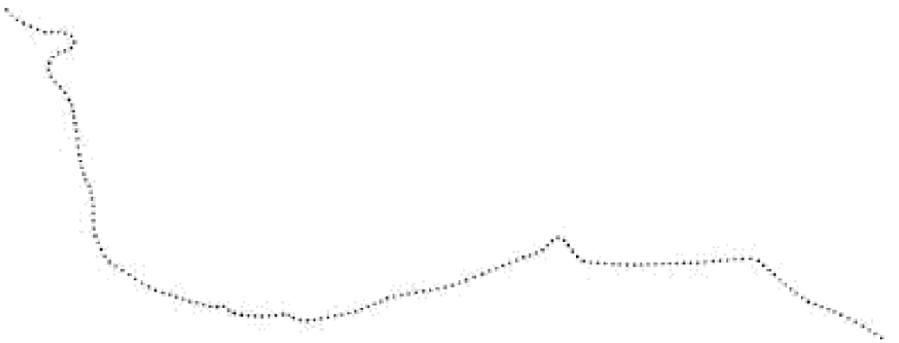
And that word, *we*, takes me quite by surprise.

PART ONE

Desolation Point

1

Minehead Sea-Front, August



We arrive far too late in Minehead.

We meant to leave Whitstable at 5.30 a.m., and this was accompanied by a whimsy that we would wrap the boy in a blanket and bundle him, sleeping, into his car seat. He would awake, by our reckoning, just as we were approaching Bristol, and we would stop somewhere stylish and enjoy a picturesque family breakfast. I would have my feet on the South West Coast Path by lunchtime.

I'm not sure when we will learn that planning is futile in our household. We are awoken at eight by Bert yelling *DAAAAAADDDDDDDYYYYY* from his bedroom, and quickly realise that we neglected to set that five o'clock alarm. We finally leave at nine after a great deal of bickering, just in time to catch the worst of the August Bank Holiday traffic. Everyone, it seems, is heading down to the West Country for a last hurrah before school starts. There is little for us to do but to queue bad-temperedly, and make numerous stops at service stations along the way.

We finally roll into Minehead at three. 'Are we in Devon

yet?' asks Bert, and I say, 'Yes,' because I can't be bothered to introduce him to a whole new county this late in the game. We are actually in Somerset, but he already knows Devon, and if everything goes to plan, I will cross the border tomorrow afternoon.

'We are in Devon,' I say, 'and it's beautiful.' I perch on the edge of the open boot of my car and lace up my walking boots. I can see Minehead Butlins across the grey shingle beach. I wonder if this will be my path, the one I've been craving, the wild one. I can't imagine it somehow. Maybe this is a misstep; maybe this isn't what I want after all.

A giant metal map in a pair of giant metal hands marks the start of the path. I pose for a photo with Bert, and then flick through the pictures on my phone, meaning to post one on Twitter with something jaunty, like *Here I go!* But I'm too appalled by how fat I look, and I post one of Bert instead, grinning impishly from between the folds of the map. Always better to post pictures of him than me these days, I find.

'I've really got to make a start,' I say to H. 'I'll never get there.' I can feel the first threads of agitation winding around me. I need to get going. Everyone else is alarmingly slow, and I am running on fast time today.

'Go on then,' he says. 'Where do you need to go?'

'I don't know. I suppose I just follow the coast. Keep the sea to my right.'

'Can't go far wrong,' he says. 'Even you.'

'Even me.'

'We'll see you on your way.'

We dawdle along the sea-front, past a pub and a cafe and an ice-cream shop. Bert wants a lolly. H is looking for a public toilet. I am getting increasingly irritable. It feels like we could all just wander endlessly around the outskirts of Minehead, and I'll eventually have to accept that this was a stupid idea that was never going to happen. I've got nine miles to cover

before the sun goes down, and I have no idea whether I can even walk nine miles anymore.

But then Bert gets distracted by a playground and I am suddenly ahead of them both, and I turn back to say, 'Bye! See you in Porlock Weir!' and I am off, alone, on the South West Coast Path, on my own two feet.

The South West Coast Path is a difficult, craggy and bloody-minded walking route that hugs the coastline between Minehead in Somerset and Poole Harbour in Dorset, taking in the seaboards of North and South Devon, and the entire perimeter of Cornwall along the way. I call it bloody-minded because it exhibits a wilful refusal to provide any kind of short cut, even where it's obvious that any sane person would take one. Walkers routinely find themselves climbing perilously down into a cove, only to make a steep ascent immediately afterwards, and often with a far more sensible, level path in full sight.

Such is the brutal glory of the SWCP. For its entire 630 miles, it clings as close to this island's crinkled edge as possible; so close, in fact, that chunks of it regularly fall into the sea. There are moments when it feels as though it was designed with mountain goats in mind, rather than humans.

Its original users – before the path had a name and a nifty set of acorn-embossed waymarkers – were coastguards, who created a series of routes that allowed them to check for smugglers in isolated coves. This perhaps justifies the exhausting pattern of rise and fall, but I detect something more in its design, too. There is a kind of landscape geekery embedded in the SWCP. Whenever I walk it, I get the sense that someone else understands my urge to know the full extent of my world; to trace its boundaries with my feet; to take the longest, hardest way round.

It may not be obvious from what I've said so far, but I

adore the SWCP; I crave it, particularly the stretch between Bantham and Start Point in the South Hams of Devon. It has seen my best of times and worst of times; I have kicked back in Devon at the most triumphant moments of my life, and scuttled down there in terror when my life was in shreds. It always seems to replenish me.

I first discovered the SWCP on honeymoon, after secretly getting married in Maidstone Registry Office. Our plan was to run away to a West Country thatched cottage, and to send out a set of breezy postcards to proclaim our matrimonial status to our friends. This wasn't the only misjudged part of the plan. When we arrived, we were greeted by an elderly woman bent double over a walking stick, who told us that her previous guests were 'something of a mystery' as they had disappeared in the middle of one night, never to be seen again. The reason for this soon became clear. The bathroom smelled of stale urine, spiders abseiled from every surface, and, every time we turned off the lights, an unnerving scuffling would start up in earnest. We endured it for two sleepless nights before throwing ourselves on the mercies of the Kingsbridge Tourist Information Office.

The woman behind the counter tutted and said, 'These awful old cottages!' Then she picked up the phone and, after a short conversation with an unknown third party in which we were described, enticingly, as a 'lovely young couple', announced that we were extremely lucky to have found anywhere at this short notice, but that she thought we'd be happier there.

We drove over to Salcombe – a town we didn't know – in some trepidation, working over a plan to simply give up and go home if the B&B turned out to have nylon bedspreads and portraits of Jesus on the walls. What greeted us instead was a vision of perfection: a high Edwardian villa with pale walls, seagrass flooring, and a wonderful landlady who spent the

rest of the week pointing us out to passers-by as we sat on our balcony, and squealing, 'These two have eloped! To my place! I've got two proper runaways!'

We didn't mind. We were too busy admiring the view over the estuary, where hundreds of white boats bobbed in the blue, with the fields of East Portlemouth in the distance. We bought our first Ordnance Survey map that week, and attempted our first proper walk (an abortive foray onto Dartmoor, where we promptly got lost in a sudden, dense, mid-July fog which we later learned was totally normal). We studied our map for beaches where I could swim, and inched the car down narrow lanes, high-sided with bracken, to pristine coves with wild seas.

One evening, at dusk, we found the clear sea at Thurlestone full of jellyfish, and perhaps it was then – I can't be sure – that we tried to get a better look at the famous rock archway, and ended up following the South West Coast Path to Hope Cove. On the way, we discovered red cliffs and watched swallows swooping over a river to drink. I couldn't believe my luck at finding such a path, so different from anything in our native Kent. I adored our shingle beaches and flat sands, of course, but here was something entirely different, where a little effort on foot would reward you with crenellated bays full of the sea-caves and rock pools we knew only from childhood picture books. We were enchanted.

That enchantment has never worn off. I am obsessed with South Devon; I crave it. And yet the last time I made it down there, I didn't walk the path at all. It seemed impossible with Bert around. I suppose other mothers would have fashioned some manner of papoose and carried their child with them along the clifftops; but then, I learned a long time ago that I don't seem to be like other mothers. It's not just the physical discomfort that bothers me (or the danger; I am not sure-footed). It's something far more unspeakable: I don't want to

walk with a child on my back. I want to return to the days when I would wander with H for hours and return home with my skin radiating the sun's heat, feeling like we'd set the world to rights. Better still, I want to walk alone. I thought I wasn't entitled to do that anymore.

I don't know what changed, then, to get me here.

A few things shifted in my mind, I suppose. Something about being nearly thirty-eight and my brow-line suddenly sagging to meet my eyelids. Something about the stiffening of my limbs and the thickening of my middle. Something about the feeling that I am probably now halfway through my life; that time is running out; that it's now or never.

Other things, too. We went to Devon in July and visited Gara Rock, which sits above my favourite beach in the world. For the first time, we stayed in the cafe at the top instead of taking the steep path down to the cove itself. It was just easier to do that than to schlep all the way down there. I was ashamed of myself, but also exhausted, lazy, and more than a little reluctant to carry a toddler back up at the end of the afternoon. I was worried about the possibility of sunburn, about my inappropriate footwear.

Even so, sitting under glass eating scones and jam, I knew I'd lost ground. When I had Bert, I dreamed of giving him something different from this: long days camped out on the beach; sleeping in the car on the way home; growing up to crave the seaside like I do, but perhaps being robust enough to cope with the sand and the breaking of routines. I couldn't understand why I was unable to deliver this. Like so many things since he'd been born, there was an invisible barrier between what I intended to achieve, and what I was able to do in practice.

Nevertheless, we finished our cakes and our tea, and decided to go home. As we began to walk back to the car park,

Bert turned to face the extraordinary view, narrowed his eyes, and started to sing:

All the clouds are in the sky,And the wind, the wind, the wind To blow us away!

I've told everyone I know about that moment and they all say, 'Yes, they do make up funny little songs at that age.' But to me, it was more than that. My little boy – all three and a quarter years of him – gazed out at the sea and reflected my own thoughts back at me. The clouds. The sky. The wind. The simple awe of those things. I didn't know he was capable of feeling such wonder.

And then, a week later, I got lost in the woods. I stopped off for a short stroll around the Blean on my way back from work, but found a group of Japanese schoolchildren about to set off on my usual circular path. They were chattering noisily, and a couple of them pulled faces at my car as I passed. People carry electricity for me; they have a current that surges around my body until I'm exhausted. It's hard to pinpoint what it is, exactly; something about their noise, their unruly movement, the unpredictable demands they might make on me. It makes the air feel thick, like humanity has . . . not a scent, but a texture. It makes me feel like I can't breathe. I had come to the woods to escape that, and yet here it was, following me. I considered turning back, unable to bear the thought of all that chaos happening within earshot as I tried to clear my head. But then I was struck with the genius idea of simply following the trail backwards, and so I set off in the opposite direction.

I am an idiot. I'm not sure how early on I took a wrong turning, but pretty soon I found myself at the beginning of what looked like a faerie path, covered in thick moss and

cobwebs. Clearly no one else had visited that part of the woods for quite some time. The sensible thing would have been to retrace my steps at that point, but no. I thought I'd be clever, and rejoin my intended route just as soon as I'd explored this untouched part of the forest.

Three hours later, I emerged thirsty and dead-limbed, having ranged all over the ancient woodland, disturbed a man taking photos of his girlfriend's breasts (I didn't like to ask him for directions, given the circumstances), and wondered whether I'd have to dig for water. I'm not sure how I managed to convince myself that I had any sort of a sense of direction; this has never been the case. Google Maps wouldn't load. I spent some time trying to identify where the sun was in the sky in order to navigate, but the only answer available seemed to be 'up', so I just had to trust that I'd eventually reach civilisation if I walked in a consistent direction. I had to text a friend to ask him to pick up Bert from nursery, and it took at least twenty attempts and waving my phone in the air at the top of a hill before the message would even send.

The thing was, once Bert was accounted for, I felt fantastic. I was free to get confused and exhausted. It was funny. It was liberating. There was one point, deep into the woods, when I stopped to see if I had a phone signal and slowly became aware of a noise like the crackle of static. I put my phone back in my pocket and listened. All around me, the forest was alive, growing and shifting, and drawing up water from the soil, and putting on new growth, and letting go of its dead. It was so loud, so absolute. If I were ever to believe in a god, I would have found it right there. It was exquisite.

That was the moment I realised how much I'd lost of myself. No, that's wrong: I'd already realised that, over and over again. I'd fought it and suffered it and mourned it. This was new. This was the moment I realised that it was necessary to get myself back again. This was the moment I

realised that, as the mother of a young child, the world was never going to give me permission to be on my own, but that I needed it anyway.

So I got home, endured a fair amount of ribbing for having no sense of direction, applied blister plasters to most areas of my feet, and quietly made plans to walk the entire South West Coast Path before I turned forty.

I told all my friends before I told H, because I was certain he would say it was impossible. But, in the event, he didn't. He said, 'Okay then,' and, 'Can I do some of it with you?' and we left it at that.

I didn't think to wonder why he gave in so easily; but then, it would be three months before I heard the voice on the radio that changed everything I knew about myself. All I knew was that something wasn't right. I thought, perhaps, that I could walk it off.

So: Minehead on August Bank Holiday Saturday. I am in Somerset rather than Devon, and the landscape I'm craving is at the opposite end of the path – about 450 miles away, by my reckoning. My planned schedule will get me there in eighteen long months' time. No matter. I am here, and I am breathing the air, and it smells of pine forest, chips with vinegar, and the brackish taint of the sea. I can see the Welsh coast, grey-blue across the water.

This is time on my own. This is an adventure. Maybe it will set me straight again.

2

Minehead to Foreland Point, August

Heading west out of Minehead, I quickly realise that my concerns about physical conditioning are entirely founded.

The first two miles take me uphill through woodland, jack-knifing on a steep path whose purpose is to rise as high and fast as is possible without a ladder. I'm not sure why I didn't detect this on my Ordnance Survey map; I'm certain I covered contour lines in year eight geography, just before I dropped it altogether. I drag myself up an endless steep incline, panting and stopping every time the path dog-legs, pretending to myself that my bootlaces need tightening, my hair needs tying back more firmly. I can't do this. I know I can't. I'm not fit enough. I just don't have it in me anymore.

H took me down paths like this in my second day of labour. The only book we'd got around to reading said it would help to visualise being somewhere else, somewhere familiar and wonderful. The pain rumbled into focus and, in desperation, he talked me along the route from Sharpitor to Bolt Head in South Devon, a narrow alley opening up into a wild headland, where I could remember the grass bristling with thrift, and the russet flash of a kestrel diving between the cliffs. It was an inspired piece of improvisation, just familiar enough to occupy all my senses during the ragged,

other-worldly intervals that the contractions brought. *It's not like pain as you know it*, I remember telling him; *it's like a tidal wave, a spirit possession.*

As the next rolled in, he talked me along the path again, and this time I saw blackberries ripening on the brambles around me, and felt warm gusts of early September air. Every imagined journey along that path became more luminous. It was, at the same time, scathingly unpleasant and exhausting and vile, but it was improved by this conjuring of the coast path, and by the intimacy of having someone with you who knew that it would be just the right thing.

There is a moment today when I wonder whether visualising contractions would help propel me up this never-ending hill, but I'm pretty certain it won't work that way around. At least I'm choosing this agony, though; at least I'm in control.

After some time the path delivers me onto Exmoor, where everything is changed. I imagined that the transition into moorland would be gradual, but it's sudden, like passing through a doorway into another room. The ground bumps around my path, met by a deep duvet of grey cloud. Everything is covered in purple heather and yellow gorse, spiked with bracken. Brambles tangle at the margins, and the blackberries are at their autumn blackest. The air is alive with birds. I feel very far away from Minehead, and abundantly free. I am alone, and it is quiet and beautiful, but far from serene: the colours blare loudly, and the sky is all menace. I love it. It fills my head, and pushes out everything else.

Now I'm on the flat, I can pick up speed, and I begin to stretch my legs to their full extent, letting the air rush across my bare arms. The sun was already past its peak when I left Minehead, and now it is low in the sky, but warm and clear. I walk and walk. There is no sense in feeling guilty at this

abundant solitude, in turning back and heading home. I can only go forward. Forward is all I have. I barely see another soul, except for a man who tries to chat with me as I overtake. I don't slow down. I'm on a roll. I yomp past him, dipping down towards the sea at Hurlestone Point, a slope so steep and rocky that my thighs sing with pain. By the time I'm at the bottom, I'm exhausted. A switch has been flipped: my legs have realised how far they've travelled, and the soles of my feet feel bruised. I'm dreaming of a cup of tea now, a hot shower, and the chance to tell everyone that I've done it, all by myself.

Still two miles to go. I skirt the bay at Bossington, and then pass onto Porlock Marsh. It's six o'clock, and the low water is full of wild flowers, cragged by the skeletons of trees. I wish I could convey the scent, somehow: sharp and green, like a florist's early in the morning. There are people on the path now, walking dogs and strolling with children, and I'm suddenly an oddity, jelly-legged, the evidence of sweat in my hair. I have to nearly drag myself across the huge, shingle plates of Porlock beach, my feet raging at me. I'm tempted to unlace my boots right there and soak my aching soles in the cold, smooth water, but I know I will never be able to lace them back up again, and anyway, the end is in sight, my husband and son just a few strides away.

By the time I reach them in the garden of Miller's hotel, all I can talk about is the marsh, its smell, the yellow and purple on Exmoor, the sea, the clouds, the wind. I feel like the survivor of a Shakespearean shipwreck, stumbling ashore in a tangle of seaweed and telling of a magical island, where nature is uncanny in ways they can't understand. I am wild with wonder.

But then Bert unearths a broken spade from the sandpit, and soon I am my irritable self again. *Don't eat the sand! Don't throw things! Do you want a time out?*

Nine miles covered today. Twelve planned tomorrow. It can't come soon enough.

We go to bed early the night of my first walk, unsure of what else to do, given that we're sharing a hotel room with a three-year-old. I'm dog-tired anyway, and so secretly grateful to be allowed to pass out at half past nine. Two hours later, I wake from the first cycle of sleep to find my whole body on fire with pain: my feet, calves, knees, hips and thighs are jangling with the stress I've suddenly imposed on them. Even my arms and shoulders join in, indignant at hauling a backpack so far. I try to blanket them under sleep, but they refuse, pushing themselves to the front of my consciousness with burning insistence. Eventually, I get up and grope around for my handbag, where I find a blister pack of ibuprofen among the crumbs and hairpins.

This, at least, affords me some sleep. But when we are awoken the next morning by Bert thudding heavily out of bed, I am almost rigid, and can only watch H rush to gather him up and bundle him in between us. It takes me a long time to get up, to bend to put my clothes on, to ease myself down into the hard chair in the breakfast room.

'Do you think you'll be okay today?' says H.

'I'll manage,' I say, taking grim care to consume enough calories. 'I'm sure I'll loosen up when I get started.'

I have greater concerns than the rigidity of my legs: the weather is not looking good. Nevertheless, I lace on my boots, H drives me back to Porlock Weir, and we make arrangements to meet up for lunch at a walkers' car park on Exmoor, around midday.

I feel a little lonelier today. It's colder and greyer, and my feet are sore. H is playing Marlena Shaw in the car as he drops me off, and the outside air seems pale without her. Still, I'm surprised how well my muscles warm up for the trudge uphill

to Culbone, past a gated toll road that's still in operation and a tiny, remote church. I cross into woodland, where a sign reminds me of the dangers of Lyme disease, and I make a mental note of how to remove a tick, should I have the misfortune to acquire one.

It's all going rather well; there's plenty more of that grand Exmoor scenery, with squat, hairy ponies whose coats seem to mimic the wiry grass. I even have no problem identifying the short path up to the main road where H will be waiting for me. My map-reading is, by my own reckoning, pretty impressive. In fact, I'm worried I will be early.

But then, the short path on the map reveals itself to be a steep, zig-zagging track in real life, which takes me the best part of an hour to climb. Ten minutes in, it begins to rain, harder and harder until I have to stop to put on my cagoule. I start to climb again, leaning into the slope, panting hard. A river has gathered itself, and it's rushing down the path in slippery ribbons. It's gruelling. Rain and sweat are dripping off my face. I just don't have enough breath for this, enough energy in my thighs. I become aware that I am muttering to myself, whispering curses as I climb. The rain splutters off my lips.

Perhaps I'm hungry, I think, and haul a cereal bar out of my backpack, choking it down as I continue up the path. It's too late, though. My brain is already a dark, rattling space, empty of any perspective but full of futile anger at inanimate things: maps, stones, mud, rain. I am angry at the incline, and I am angry at remoteness. I am angry that I am here. I am angry that this is my choice. The only way I can manage to continue is to count my steps in groups of one hundred, and then of fifty, and then, ultimately, of ten. I start to lose the numbers after ten anyhow.

When I see our car waiting at the top of the track, I try to pick up speed, but I only seem to move slower. I feel like a

zombie in a cheap horror film, lurching, incoherent, and laughably feeble. I slump into the car and groan like the undead. Bert is asleep in the back. The windows are steamed up.

'Not great?' says H.

'Fucking awful,' I say.

We find a pub for lunch, but I've got no appetite. I'm just cold and tired. It's still pouring down outside. We pay up and get back in the car. Bert is now petitioning – unfathomably – for crazy golf. H drives me back to the car park where he picked me up, and says, 'Chin up. Just keep the sea to your right and you can't go wrong.'

It takes me a dispiriting half-hour to walk back onto the coast path, despite it being downhill. My map marks a direct track down a slope, but in practice this turns out to be a near-vertical muddy bank, covered in brambles and nettles. I scramble back up the few metres I've travelled, and strike off for the longer, slower path I'd sought to avoid.

I need a break nearly as soon as I've found the actual SWCP again. I shouldn't have diverted off the route for lunch. I should have brought sandwiches with me, and not got distracted by the promise of a warm, dry pub with my family to talk to. It was a weak instinct; I can see that now. The path has become wooded and narrow, barely the width of my tread, and it is cut into a steep embankment that drops two hundred metres into the sea. Several times, my feet slip, and I imagine how I'd knock into each tree like a pinball on my way down.

I cross over a gushing stream, swollen by the rain, and then sit on a wet log and drink all the tea in my flask. As an afterthought, I decide to indulge in my favourite woodland pastime of taking a 'nature wee' (Bert's term), making my own little stream down the drenched slope. Then, I stand up and immediately slip over in it. I stay on the ground for a few

3

Foreland Point to Ilfracombe, September

On my thirty-eighth birthday, I refuse to take part in any celebrations until I have completed my grudge match with Foreland Point.

We set off early, leaving Bert with friends who will join us later. Late morning we drive past Minehead, where last month's walk started, and soon we are crossing the distinctive Exmoor landscape of yellow gorse and purple heather. H suggests that we park in Countisbury, the other side of the headland that proved my nemesis last time.

'No,' I say, 'I'm going to start where I gave up.'

'But you walked the extra miles when you got lost. There's no need.'

'I don't care.'

'Well, we can't park there. We'll have to walk a mile just to get to the right place on the path.'

'I'm not going to start skipping bits for the sake of fifteen minutes' walking.'

I would never have guessed that walking together would be one of the losses I'd tot up when Bert arrived, but it's actually one of the most profound. We started walking when I was at university, and needed to fill dull Sundays when all the shops were closed; we bought a book of pub walks and truly believed we'd earned a few pints after a three-mile circular

stroll. H is not a natural walker. His size-thirteen feet are – in the words of the orthopaedic surgeon he saw after breaking a metatarsal – 'constructed like flippers' and 'just within the range of normal'. Apart from providing hilarious phrases with which to periodically taunt him, this means in practice that he gets awful blisters every time we walk. This is not – and it has taken me a very long time to accept this – his fault.

We park up, and he fusses with two pairs of socks and various tensions of lacing. I know he'll stop in a few metres anyway to start the process all over again. Still, the sea is pale blue and spotted with the shadows of clouds, and the bracken is already turning the hills rusty.

First of all we zig-zag down the road to the coast path (H stops twice), and then climb up onto the headland. I can't remember how far I got before I turned round and gave up last time, but I can now see that I'd done the worst of it. I wish I'd had the faith to push on, rather than doubting that I could manage that last piece of effort. I could have at least reached Countisbury, and that would have felt like a proper destination, instead of a roadside.

Up on the high moor, we pass a herd of grazing Exmoor ponies, and repeatedly have to stop to avoid treading on the shiny black beetles that seem to congregate along the path. The air is full of birds that I wish I could identify. It takes an hour and a half of moderate walking to reach Lynmouth – nothing, really. Some of it is even a little dull, hugging roadsides and skirting playing fields. When we arrive, we sit in the garden of the Rock House Hotel and I toast my birthday with a pint of Tribute and a bag of crisps. Soon, Bert is running over the West Lyn footbridge to greet me, shouting, 'Mummymummymummy!' and everything is set straight again.

In the days – and then weeks – following my first walk, I was

troubled by the thought that I didn't cope.

I don't mean in terms of fitness; I expected that. I never took so much as a vitamin before I had Bert, but pregnancy broke me. I developed high blood pressure that caused pointless stays in hospital, and had asthma for the first time in my life. I endured horrific nosebleeds and nausea that remained stubbornly in place into the third trimester. There was a week, between Christmas and New Year, when I felt fantastic and rearranged all the kitchen cupboards for three days in a row. But then I woke up the next morning with chest pains and it all started again.

I still find myself returning to my GP every four months to check my raging blood pressure. My stomach valve, apparently, is stretched out of shape; the constant acid reflux has made my voice crackle. I swallow a little pile of pills every morning to deal with both problems. I'm aggrieved at these incursions into my otherwise robust health, but I also realise that I would be a fool to ignore them. That doesn't stop me resenting the daily parade of tablets; I feel more aged by the box of blister packs by the toaster than I ever have by the lines around my eyes or the gentle sagging of my jaw.

My right hip is wrong now, too. I dislocated it while I was giving birth – not that I noticed at the time, given my comprehensive approach to self-administering an epidural. I wasn't taking any chances. However, the first time I tried to walk, I felt a distinct looseness in the joint, which only got worse over the weeks that followed, well into the time when people were telling me that a walk would do me good. *Take baby out in the pushchair, get a bit of fresh air. Meet people. You'll feel better.* It's not such a great prospect when you feel like a rickety chair, and when contact with people makes you physically, tearfully nauseated.

'It happens, I'm afraid,' said my doctor, and referred me to a physiotherapist who lectured me on how he gets out on

his bike three times a week, even if it's 11 p.m., and despite having three kids. Bully for him. I asked him how many books he'd written and he looked at me blankly. He already thought I was stupid at that point, anyway, because I could somehow never recall the exercises he gave me, even a few minutes after he'd shown me them.

'I don't remember that at all,' I would say, in a kind of wonder at the memory-blank I found for the preceding few moments of my life.

'But I took you through it,' he would say, in a different kind of wonder – the dark kind that teachers feel towards students who simply will not learn. 'You did it with your own body.'

My own body. That was some kind of a joke, surely? My own body that had been poked by unwanted hands for eight months, confined in hospital under guilt-inducing threats that they *could not be held responsible*, strapped to machines that whirred and ticked and chattered.

My own body that could be stopped in Marks and Spencer so that a woman could gaze into my pram and say she hoped I was breastfeeding; that could be scolded for holding my baby for too long, or for not enough time; that really ought to be sleeping alongside my child in the same bed – or in a Moses basket, depending on who was insisting at the time – rather than separately, quietly, in a different room.

My own body, that should be carrying my boy rather than pushing him in that pram, because the woman in the grocer's did when hers were small, and it was good for her back, and the prams take up such a terrible amount of space in the shop.

My own body, that didn't even smell right anymore, and which had this terrible new landscape of sags and puckers below the neckline, and which didn't quite seem to be able to behave in a way that would attract approval.

This man, who had three children of his own, and so *knew what it was like*, would have to excuse me if I had entirely taken leave of my own body by that point, and all the things it could and could not do, because otherwise I would lose the last shreds of my sanity.

My lack of fitness, then, was no surprise. It was deliberate, planned, protective. I'm not even ashamed. In the end, it was easier to let go of fitness than to hand over my body, and my stuttering, inadequate brain, to somebody else's judgemental hands. I had to haul in my sails, or be wrecked on the rocks. Every other person we know is a triathlete these days; it seemed easier to be nothing at all, rather than to tread the awkward, halfway path of compromise.

But the truth is, I coped, physically, with the walking. It surprised me that I made it at all. I found it difficult, and I was exhausted afterwards, but my knees didn't fall from under me, and I made it up steep ascents and over long distances. No. What troubles me is the way that my mind seemed to unravel under duress; the way that I muttered dark things as I dragged myself up Glenthorne in the rain to meet H; the way that I lost myself in obsessive rituals at Desolation Point, anointing my head with the water of every stream I crossed, asking their nymphs for safe passage. I was hungry, yes. I didn't eat enough. I let my glucose levels fall too low, and then refused to replenish them properly, even after I realised. But then, this became an obsession in itself, keeping myself clean and light as I walked. The hunger wasn't a simple error; it was just another arrow pointing to my defective mind.

I haven't coped with an awful lot of things in the last few years. I didn't cope with being at home, alone, with a baby. I didn't cope with the lack of a job to do, with the absence of a structure to propel me forward. I didn't cope with the other mothers, their obsessive talk of milk and sleep, their earnest discussions of progress, development. The very word 'mother'

After fifteen minutes of agonising, heart-pumping walking up a never-ending series of slopes and steps, I come to regret my smuggery. Soon, though, we are walking along the Valley of Rocks (which I insist on calling the Valley of the Shadow of Death, repeatedly, and to no one's amusement), and the whole thing becomes very pleasant. The sun is out, there's a slight September chill in the air, and we're following a level path through craggy Exmoor scenery. By lunchtime, we have solved all the world's problems, and are rather pleased with our progress, so we divert to the Hunter's Inn at Trentishoe for lunch.

I open out the Ordnance Survey map, wondering what time we're likely to reach Combe Martin. Beccy points out that I should calculate my walking time at twenty minutes per mile, plus five minutes per contour line I cross, whether up or down. I didn't realise that it was legitimate to budget extra time for hills; I thought you were supposed to just go up a gear and tough it out. Armed with this expertise, I run my finger along the path, and declare that it's all pretty much flat from here on in, with maybe a little slopey bit towards the end. We should be home in a couple of hours.

Well. It appears that the formula only works if you actually pay attention to what's on the map. After an hour's walking, we come to Holdstone Down, a boggy patch of scrubland that dips alarmingly down towards sea level. 'That can't be the path,' says Beccy, and we stare at the map until we have to admit that it is, indeed, the only way onwards. The ensuing descent is slow, slippery and surprisingly hard on the knees. It's deeply unsatisfying: we feel no sense of achievement at the bottom (after all, gravity would have done a better job than our legs managed) and our only reward is a steep climb afterwards.

We therefore undertake the climb up Girt Down in entirely bad humour, hauling ourselves onwards with the

help of affirmations such as, 'Fuck off, you bastard, wanking fucking hill.' I have to stop halfway up because I'm beginning to see spots before my eyes; and then stop again three-quarters of the way up because I can't breathe. When we reach the top, we realise it's just a plateau before another hill begins, and at this point I insist on lying down on the grass for a while, and am hostile to the idea of ever getting up again.

'Don't worry,' says Beccy, 'this is all building up your fitness,' and I tell her to fuck off. At the top of this mound is a Great Hangman Cairn, a pile of stones that perfectly expresses my desire for the sweet release of death. Some wag has poked their walking stick into the top of it, but I doubt very much that this ascent cured anyone of anything.

We add our respective stones to the pile, and then look up to see an old biplane flying overhead. The pilot dips his wing to us and waves from the cockpit, and that suddenly makes me aware of how high we are: the extraordinary view all around, the sea to our right and the moor rising and falling below us, miles into the distance. It's a magical, exhausting privilege to have laboured all the way up here, even if it does seem to have broken me entirely.

We begin the slow descent into Combe Martin, our tired legs making the last mile stretch for hours. It is only later that I realise that this was the highest point of the entire path, and I have conquered it already.

The next morning, I'm about to wash down my customary handful of pills to complete my breakfast, when I realise that I've screwed up. Instead of two types of blood-pressure tablet and one antacid, I've just packed three packets of blood-pressure pills. This is stupid, and even more stupidly, I didn't even notice yesterday. It is almost certainly why I have stomach ache and am burping at comical intervals.

In any case, it's not like I can do much about my antacids as I'm a five-hour drive away. I make a mental note to perhaps seek out some Gaviscon in Ilfracombe and we set off. Beccy, thankfully, is amused by my constant belching. I congratulate myself for having the sort of friends who stick with you through digestive distress.

The sky is blue and the sun is low over the sea. It is clear that we finally left behind Exmoor just west of Combe Martin, and that the coast is in the process of remodelling itself into something new. We walk down a narrow alley, and then along a main road. We get stung by high nettles on narrow paths and slip on mud. There are beautiful views in places – the natural harbour at Small Mouth, complete with a lone, white boat, makes us stand and stare – but somehow this is a frustrating walk; not steep or difficult, just uncomfortable and too close to civilisation.

By the time we round the corner to Hele Bay, I'm tired and irritable. Beccy (who is far fitter than me) wants to push on through to Ilfracombe, but I'm bilious and sore-throated, and pathetically hungry. We stop for a cream tea and sit for a while, watching a group of young women walkers who are perching on the wall with ice lollies. Perhaps walking is all the rage these days; they certainly look more glamorous than us, with their pristine walking gear, patterned head-wraps and a pair of poles apiece. 'Even we weren't lame enough to go on walking holidays when we were that age,' says Beccy, and we allow ourselves a fleeting moment of self-delusion that we were once at all cool.

When we set off again, I do not feel refreshed. I'm dog-tired, and the scone has done terrible things to my digestion. I feel as though it's trying to crawl back out of my gullet. My sense of grievance is not helped by the hulking great hill we have to climb, when there is clearly a road that just cuts around it. I am heartily sick of this sort of self-flagellating

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