

# THE ELECTRICITY OF EVERY LIVING THING



A WOMAN'S WALK  
IN THE WILD TO FIND HER  
WAY HOME

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# The Electricity of Every Living Thing

A Woman's Walk in  
the Wild to Find Her  
Way Home

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## *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

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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

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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 . . .

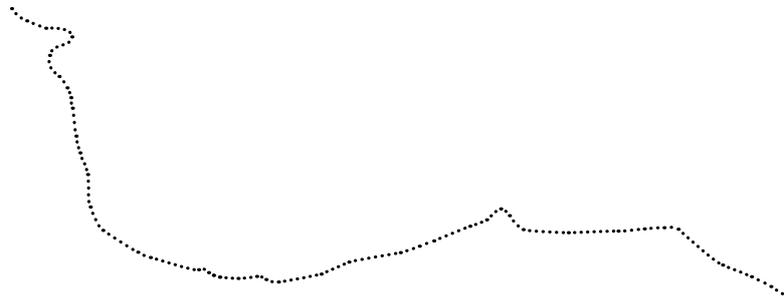
'One cliché about autism is that romantic relationships are very, very difficult,' he says. 'You're married. How did courtship work for you?'

. . . 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.

# 1

## Minehead Sea-Front, August



**W**e 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.

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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

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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 seaboard 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

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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 Bantam 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.

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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 crenelated 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

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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

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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

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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 ear-shot 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,

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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

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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.