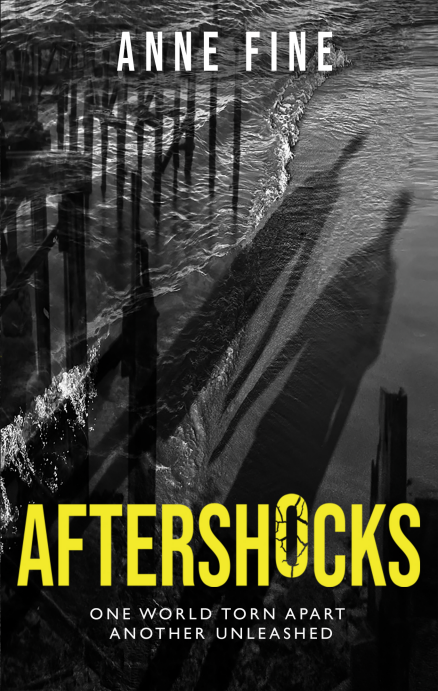




ANNE FINE

AFTERSHOCKS

ONE WORLD TORN APART
ANOTHER UNLEASHED

AFTERSHOCKS

Anne Fine



Dad dropped me off at Mum's, but even before I'd scrambled out of the car, she was frantically waving at both of us from the kitchen window.

'Don't drive away,' I warned. 'I'm pretty sure she wants to tell you something.'

I saw it on his face: *Oh, Lord! What have I done wrong now?*

Mum hurried to the kerbside. 'You can't leave Louie here. No, not tonight. Or tomorrow.'

'But it's Thursday.'

'I know it's Thursday, Philip. But first thing in the morning I'll be off on my walking weekend and won't be back till Monday night.'

'You should have told me.'

She put on her *gotcha!* look. 'I did tell you, Philip.

First I *asked* you, and you agreed to switch the days around. That was two months ago. I reminded you two weeks ago, and then again on Monday.’ She gave him a triumphant smile. ‘Would you like to see the screenshots?’

He’d lost the battle so he tried another tack. ‘Well, can’t you take him with you?’

‘I’m not going walking with Mum’s friends!’ I said. ‘They spend their whole time teasing me.’ (I would have added, ‘*And* they walk too fast,’ but that would have sounded pathetic.)

‘Why don’t I drive you round to Will’s?’

‘No chance,’ I said. ‘His gran’s there this weekend.’

‘Just take him back,’ said Mum, as if I were some mongrel dog that Dad had unaccountably picked up from a rescue centre and tried to dump at her place.

‘Anna, I can’t,’ Dad said. ‘I’m off on an inspection.’

‘Well, take him with you.’

‘I can’t,’ he said again. ‘It’s way out east. Some godforsaken hole in the old Endlands. It’s going to take a full four days. Possibly even longer.’

‘Then make sure he packs his toothbrush,’ Mum said cheerily.

And she was gone.

ONE

On the way to Nowhere-on-Stilts

Dad said he'd never been to the Causeway Pumping Station before. He remembered that he'd been scheduled to do the function and safety checks there a few years earlier, but in the end someone else was given that assignment and he'd been packed off somewhere else.

He didn't know much about the place. Everyone knew that the Endlands were horribly isolated, out there on the very furthest edge of the country. And dull. One rubbish road to get there. Not much when you arrived. No pizza places or cinemas. Nothing to do in the evenings.

'Good job it's one of the simplest pumping stations in the country,' Swati kept telling the three who made up the inspection team. 'The equipment's so basic that

you can be in and out of the plant well before you go stark, staring crazy.'

So we would be four on the trip. My dad, Valentina and Miles – and now me. Everyone turned a blind eye to the backpack I'd dumped in the corner of the equipment shed, and pretended they didn't know that I'd be coming along. Swati's no idiot, and she's been Chief Coordinator of Inspection Teams for ages now. But Dad still somehow managed to give her the impression that I was just hitching a lift a mile or so along the road, as far as the house of a friend.

I sat on a humming generator thing and watched them as they got their act together. Dad went through the inventory to make sure they'd remembered all their bits of equipment. Miles was sorting out the packages of pre-packed food in case the very few tiny shops that were supposed to be along the start of the route all happened to be closed. Hardly anyone goes to the Endlands, and what we learn about them in school would put you off going anyway. Swati had warned us that anywhere more than a hundred miles east of Highway Five, the population live entirely by their own means and keep to their own rules. 'They're a bit weird,' she said.

Miles clearly felt obliged to make the obvious joke.
'Well, we should fit in well. We're all a bit weird, too.'

'Not the way those people are,' Swati had muttered.
So Miles was packing up a heap of basic foodstuffs, and a few treats to keep us going. Swati made sure the works garage gave us the most dependable of the vehicles.

'Any trouble,' she warned us, 'and you'll be stuck out there for ever. You're pretty well on the way to Nowhere-on-Stilts.'

She waved our van out of the storage hangar, towards the massive gates. And off we went.

TWO

Toby's gone now

The drive took far, far longer than expected. Once we were off the highway and into the protected wilderness, the road was poor – enough bank slides and potholes to slow us down a lot. It dwindled to a one-lane track much sooner than suggested by the map. That wasn't too much of a hindrance – there didn't seem to be much traffic coming the other way. I doubt if, in the many hours that we were in the van, we met more than a dozen vehicles, and only once did we have to back up to let a lorry past.

After we left the last tiny roadside garage, the flickering of glare and shade that had been so mesmeric gave way to thicker, darker forest. The air was steamy, and every tree trunk appeared to be coated in strangely shaped lichens and fungi.

‘Nothing but mould and mildew,’ Miles complained.

‘At least you’re safe in the van,’ said Valentina. ‘When I drove through before, I made the big mistake of going for a walk. I came back reckoning that every single living creature for miles around had taken the chance to startle me or bite me or sting me, and every plant I walked past was out to scratch or strangle me.’

Miles stared out into the still-deepening shadows. ‘It’s all so *dense*. Mile after mile of dark green forest. No villages. No farms. No tiny homesteads. Not even any clearings. Why aren’t there any *people*?’

‘Pretty well all of the Endlanders fetched up in the small villages strung out along the Causeway Bay,’ said Valentina.

‘Where we’re going?’

‘A tiny bit further than that. They’re on the far side of the coastal ridge.’

‘But what on earth do they *live* on?’ Miles wailed. (He sounded so anxious that suddenly I had an inkling why Dad and Valentina had left him in charge of packing all our food.)

‘Fish, mostly,’ Valentina told him. ‘Fish that they catch themselves. In fact, you only have to spend a few hours there to reckon that everyone along the bay

seems to belong more to the sea than the land.'

'Like seals,' Miles said. 'Or mermaids.'

'They do have boats,' said Valentina tartly, as if she thought Miles was so dense he wouldn't have realised. 'They use them for everything. Up till a few years ago there wasn't even a road along the coastal side of the ridge. Everything and everyone had to go along the beach. I saw a painting in the art gallery at Sachard that showed all these carts and donkeys and clusters of people passing one another on the sands.'

I'm sure she would have told us more, but it was obvious that, at the mere mention of an art gallery, Miles had lost interest. He started hunting noisily around his feet for one of the packets of biscuits he'd stowed there before we set off. I took the shortbread whirls he offered me and went back to staring out at the strange mosses dangling from the trees in long and wispy strands, as if the grey fluff of a thousand vacuum cleaner bags had been emptied out over their branches.

The three of them took turns to drive. Both Dad and Valentina were steady enough, but all of us got tense when Miles took over. His steering was erratic. It was as if his mind, like mine, had drifted somewhere else. But I have an excuse. When I'm in any sort of vehicle

I can't help thinking about my brother Toby, two years older than me, and killed by a tearaway driver over a year ago. So Toby's gone now. But we had all those years of sitting next to one another in cars, bickering and sleeping, complaining about how bored we were, or playing stupid games. I'm getting better at feeling that I'm doing all right by myself in other places now. But in the back seat of a car, I always feel as if one half of me is torn away. I feel half-empty.

Why don't I simply say it? I feel *crap*.

I'm glad that Dad took over the driving again as dusk was settling in. Miles got out to change places and, as he did so, a chocolate wrapper that had been stuck to his trainer in the footwell of the van was ripped away by the breeze and floated along the track.

Valentina saw. 'Hey!' she said sharply as he set off around the van to get in the other side. 'Better go get it.'

So, Miles chased after it and picked it up. He got back in, making a face that as good as said, *fusspot!* My dad stuck up for Valentina as he slid the van back into gear by carolling Mum's walking group's jingle, 'Leave only footprints, take only memories.'

'Who'd want to remember this creepy place?' said Miles. And I could see his point. It was the most

unnerving forest I'd ever driven through. All of the trees that we were passing now seemed to be crouched on massive twisted roots that stood high off the ground, as if at any moment, when it was fully dark, they might rise up and stride about the way they do in horror films. Each time we caught a glimpse of the rising moon, it looked far larger than it should have done, and swarms of bloated bats whirled overhead.

'Spooky,' I knew my brother would be saying. He would be loving every minute. 'Seriously weird.'

In front of us, the spiky blue silhouette of the coastal range drew closer. 'Good thing they built the pumping station this side,' Dad said. 'I wouldn't fancy driving over the top of that ridge in the pitch dark.'

'What's there to see, in any case?' Miles muttered grumpily.

Valentina took what he'd said more as a question than a complaint about the posting Swati had chosen for them. 'Apart from the string of tiny coastal villages? Not much,' she admitted. 'Fishermen and upturned boats. Nets spread to dry. Most of the locals wearing the sort of drab, baggy clothes you'd put on to clear out your attic. Old people hobbling about with woven baskets.' There was a moment's pause. 'And everyone staring, of course.'

‘Staring?’

‘Yes. People in the Endlands are always staring. They almost seem to make a point of acting as if strangers are something quite out of the ordinary.’

‘When aeroplanes were new,’ I said, remembering something my great-grandmother once told me, ‘everyone stopped and pointed when they flew overhead.’

‘Yes, rather like that, I suppose,’ said Valentina. ‘But more unnerving, somehow, because of the *way* they’re looking.’

‘The way they’re looking?’

I honestly don’t think Valentina noticed the little shudder she gave as she began to explain. ‘I think it might be partly the colour of their eyes. They’re blue, but it’s a rather washed-out, watery blue. They can look so *expressionless* – so cold and blank. You see them watching and you get the shivers. But I can see why they might be so guarded. We were the enemy for so long, and treated them so badly.’ She shrugged. ‘They are an odd lot altogether, to be frank.’

I do biology in school. ‘How come they have blue eyes?’ I asked. ‘Blue eyes are totally rare now.’

I got the feeling that my question made Valentina uncomfortable. But she explained. ‘Endlanders never

mixed. So it's not just the eyes. They're also almost all astonishingly tall and thin, with bone-white faces. Almost bloodless-looking. And they have spindly legs, and wrists and arms like glass rods. They are so colourless you'd think they never saw the sun at all, let alone spend most of their lives fishing along the bay.'

'They sound like *ghouls*,' said Miles. 'Oh, I am really looking forward to this trip!' It was the third thing in a row he'd said to make it clear he wasn't happy. I couldn't work Miles out at all. Dad always said he was a first-class engineer 'for somebody his age' (though Miles was well into his twenties). But then Dad also claimed he sometimes acted as if he was no older than eight and had never learned how to grow up. Dad even told me Swati had to think the teams out very carefully because some people hated to work with him. 'The way he deals with people gets on their nerves.'

So, Miles was often paired with Valentina and my dad because they were both middle-aged and sensible. Valentina comes from one of those old Russian provinces. Mum says that, with those high Slavic cheekbones and raven black hair, she's absolutely beautiful, but Dad treats her simply as a mate – just engineers together, doing a job they love.

We drove on for a good few miles. Then, rounding a bend, without a moment's warning, nearly came off the track.

'What the—?'

Dad hit the brakes so hard that we were all thrown forward. Without the seat belts, I reckon Valentina and Dad would have gone straight through the windscreen.

'What on *earth*?'

'Scary!'

It was, too. Now that we'd all had time to get a grip and look up, I could see what had freaked Dad. Looming above us was a massive face carved in the mountain rock. And what a face! Thin and cadaverous, but the height of a house. Even in the poor light, the pale grey stone from which the image had been cut gave it a grim, unhealthy look. The face's huge wide eyes peered down at us as if we were mere beetles on the road. Its mouth was open, twisted in a way that made me feel we should be hearing some giant roar of agony echoing round us.

Dad shoved the vehicle into reverse. We skidded back. 'Steady on, Philip,' Valentina warned. 'It's only a face on the rock. It's not going to bend down and eat you.'

Beside me, Miles was chuckling. 'A rock face on a rock face.'

Dad made an effort to calm down, and we drove on.

'Why's it there, anyway?' Miles asked after a while. He flipped his hair back, but it was such a mop it fell forward straightaway. 'Was it some sort of warning, like those huge statues that stare out from Easter Island?'

'I think those are simply images of ancient kings,' Dad said.

'Maybe they are,' Miles shrugged. 'I don't know anything about primitive art. But I bet if that scary face had been carved anywhere less off the beaten track, people would know about it well before it startled them halfway to death as they drove round that corner. They would have seen a dozen billboards on the way, telling them about it.'

'Yes, actually – you could have *warned* me,' Dad grumbled to Valentina. 'You must have seen it when you were here before.'

'I expect I was so freaked by all the ruts and potholes in the track, I never raised my eyes to notice it.'

But it had given all of us a shock, and I was glad when we drove round a few more bends and saw the pumping station up ahead, tucked in a fold of the ridge.

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