

THE INSTANT

Also by Amy Liptrot

The Outrun

AMY LIPTROT

The Instant



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PROLOGUE

February Hunger Moon

I'VE BEEN GETTING TEXT MESSAGES from the moon. A note flashes on my phone, asking if the moon can track my location, and I consent.

I have moved to a new city but the moon is following me around. It texts to tell me when it will be out. Through the windows of my flat in Kreuzberg, there is just a parallelogram of sky at the top of the courtyard, only a small space to catch the passing moon on certain clear nights.

B said that people move here just so they can tell their friends back home that they're living in Berlin. B said that people moving here often feel like they've dropped several years, that they can extend their youth.

The app uses my location to tell me the moon's phase, direction, distance at all times. Right now, the moon is 384,012 miles away from my hand, which is holding my phone close to my heart, as I sit at the table in the narrow kitchen of this flat with tall windows in an old-style apartment block, stinging nettles by the front door. I'm just home from work, vibrating with tiredness. The moon is waxing gibbous and is 25.2 degrees above the horizon, almost due east. It rose just after midday and will set around 3 a.m.

I run a bath, consult my digital charts, then wait for the moon. My bath is next to the window and I open it wide to the cool air. I hear stray cats mewing in the stairwell, magpies rattling in the bare trees and the indistinct rumble of the city that reminds me of the wind back home. My first sight of the moon is its reflection in my opposite neighbour's window: a bulbous glow in a double-glazed mirror. Over the evening, it passes like a distant ship. I keep going back to the window and am thrilled to catch its oblivious light.

In the stairwell there are political graffiti and signs: anti-gentrification, pro-refugee, anarchist. The building used to be squatted and there are some communal elements between the flats: shared Wi-Fi and handyman. I hear the neighbours around the courtyard, sex and

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arguments in various languages, someone playing the flute, a baby crying. Every 1 May, there is a big techno party in the courtyard. It's electric around here.

The internet is hectic and I go to the moon to relax, opening new browser tabs for the moon's Wikipedia page and Google Maps of its surface. I follow new lunar developments from NASA. I learn that the moon was probably once part of the earth, sheared off by an asteroid. B, who moved from Scotland to Tasmania, tells me that there is a different moon in the southern hemisphere: it waxes and wanes in the opposite direction. I learn that the moon is slowing down the earth's rotation. The moon is holding on to us.

I grew more aware of the moon and, in particular, its effect on the tides when I was back home on the island. Low tide at new moon is the time to dig for shellfish called spoots on the beach, and after a full moon is the time to go looking for things washed up – driftwood and treasure – at the high-water line.

★ ★ ★

My street and the few surrounding are a mix between different eras of Kreuzberg: corner shops, Turkish bakeries, a garage selling ‘revolution equipment’, next to a sushi place, high-concept coffee shops and designer boutiques. There are clothes piled on the pavement for anyone to take for free and there are also places selling dresses for a thousand euros.

People on the internet ask questions. What is the moon made of? Why can I see the moon during the day? Why is the moon red? Can the moon be destroyed?

I’ve been wearing long skirts and fingerless gloves, painting my nails like I used to. I’ve been going to parties. In the English-language bookshop, I read aloud from *The Odyssey* while two Norwegians played synth.

I’ve run away but I find the moon everywhere I go. I found a tiny pink plastic crescent in Tempelhofer Feld – a huge park in the middle of the city – right there on the footpath. In my first week in the city I found a beautiful lunar calendar in a bookshop and have it Blu-tacked to my wall. Twice a month at new and full moon I await Syzygy: the instant when moon, earth and sun are aligned. The lunar cycles are almost all I have in my diary for the year. My future is blank but I know what the moon will be doing.

There will be thirteen full moons in the coming

solar calendar year. The full moons of each month and season have different traditional names. February's full moon is the Hunger Moon and March's is known as the Lenten, Worm or Sap Moon. The names come to us from various cultures – Native American, Celtic, Anglo-Saxon – but are all tied to the seasons and agricultural year.

The moon has now passed over the courtyard and behind the buildings but I'm looking at photographs of it online. I close Twitter, the dating app, the eBay listings. Lunar mosaics are created by hundreds of different image frames taken through a telescopic camera, added together to create a highly detailed picture of the moon's surface: textured craters, mountains and cliffs. They are magnified, monochrome and glowing. It's February, and the city is dim but I'm madly seeking moonlight.

I've been in Berlin for four months and have lived in five houses. I've been cycling over cobbles. I've been keeping my devices charged, wearing shorts I found on the pavement. I've been sitting outside *Spätis* corner-shops, smoking roll-ups, drinking Club-Mate, watching attractive and strange people on the street. I had a love affair that lasted for two nights and two afternoons.

People in this town can't commit to anything, but the moon is always orbiting and the months pass

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relentlessly. I don't speak the language but I know '*der Mond*'.

My attachment to the moon grew during the years I've been lonely and so did the moon's attachment to me. The moon, I tell B, is my boyfriend.

HOW TO SWIM THROUGH WAVES

July
Thunder Moon

LAST SUMMER I RENTED A little flat on the island, in the small harbour town, close enough to the pier to hear the passenger announcements on the ferry, which arrived twice a day, its horn setting a slow rhythm to the days.

I had ripped up a redundant London *A-Z* and used the pages as wallpaper. My shower was full of sand and seaweed.

Outside the back door, where I went to smoke, chittering sparrows filled the ivy. I was picking up bits of work, considering another season with my old employers, waiting for something to happen.

Although I had this place now, with a bookshelf and

broadband, I often found myself standing in the kitchen awash with loneliness. I'd been living alone for a few years and it was getting to me.

Often I'd walk to the top of the hill and watch the moon rise. I'd look down over the town and out across the bay to the other islands and, beyond, to mainland Scotland and out west where the Atlantic stretches.

On other nights, I stayed up late travelling in bed, wandering the internet. With my laptop whirring warmly on my duvet, I walked the streets of international cities with Google Street View.

I fall asleep. I dream I am a bird flying high above the internet.

Once a week or so, I met my eccentric sea-swimming group. We chatted while getting undressed beside our cars, about the weather, sea temperature and conditions. Then, without too much hesitation, we'd walk together into the water.

I also swam alone, often from a small beach at the edge of town. I'd eye the water doubtfully for a while before peeling off my jeans and feeling the wind cold on my legs. I put on my swim boots and gloves and left the rest of my clothes piled up on the pebbles. I moved into the water in increments, all my pores and

organs and bodily functions reacting to the cold immersion. When the water was at the bottom of my ribcage, I gathered my will and pushed off into breaststroke, gasping aloud.

These were the best minutes of my week. I swam parallel with the coast, getting used to the temperature, my limbs pale under the greenish water, some sea in my mouth, never going too far out or staying in too long. For those minutes I submitted to the sea, to being submerged to the neck and trusting I would be held up.

The sea was the only place where I didn't take my phone. Most nights I spent my evenings scrolling. I got stuck on an oddly translated Wiki-how page about 'how to swim through waves'.

The easiest way to let a wave pass is to duck under it.

I took a trip south, travelling the country, staying with couples, hearing them chat and laugh through the wall at night. When I came back to the island, I was in a filthy mood, angry, contained and dissatisfied.

I was sexually frustrated and my heart ached. I wanted to cry and often did. For the first time in my life, I felt

aware of myself ageing, my thirties speeding by. I was embarrassed by my conventional desires. I had hoped I was more resourceful and interesting than to want a boyfriend. But the moon, cold and elusive, was not always enough.

I downloaded Tinder and its location-based algorithm showed me inaccessible people on oil rigs and passing fishing boats far out to sea.

If you see an exceptionally big wave approaching, the best method is to swim straight towards it.

I developed a crush on a friend and after some time found the courage to tell him. Politely but firmly, he said he wasn't interested. Boundless sadness. I was ashamed to be so upset over something that hadn't happened, to be upset over nothing. I raised and destroyed armies in my mind.

I decided to make myself get over it. I would seduce someone else I knew. I shaved my legs, put on a dress and walked to his house. He wasn't in. After that, I didn't have it in me. I wasn't too bothered.

Island gigantism is the phenomenon by which animals constrained to an island become, over generations, larger than animals of the same species on the mainland. Without

as many predators or competitors, they are able to evolve to be bigger. It's most commonly seen in rodents. On my islands, voles and mice have been shown to be bigger than their cousins on the mainland.

If you find yourself caught by a wave and tumbled around, relax! Don't try to fight it. The wave will let you go in a few seconds.

I walked up the Black Craig, then along the lonely stretch of coast to the highest cliffs on the island. From the coastal path, I looked at the wave-energy devices bobbing on the sea and waved to the ferry but I don't think anyone waved back. A sea stack looked like a colossal exclamation mark dropped into the water, an improbable structure that I imagined collapsing right then and there with only me watching. I thought about how, the day before in the supermarket fruit-and-veg aisle holding a soggy lettuce, I decided I was definitely leaving the island at the end of the summer, but right now, up there with the pink thrift and orchids and lapwings and wheatears and puffins, I didn't feel so sure.

I thought about how someone had told me there is only one house on the island that can't be seen from another. I thought about how the tiny *Primula scotica* likes exposed salty places.

I followed the burn up into the hills to find a wooden sauna I'd heard about and seen pictures of, taken not so long ago. Curlews were going bonkers. I found the little waterfall and the pool dammed up below it but the sauna wasn't there. It had burned to the ground, leaving only blackened stumps. I cooled my feet in the water, walked to the road, then hitched a lift back to town with a seal biologist.

I had the skeleton of a good life but there was no heart inside. I'd been wearing the same warm layers year round for the last two years. My summer and party dresses hung in the wardrobe unworn. My photos used to be all of people; now they were of the sky.

The birds I saw were the high point of my day. One day, a male harrier, a silver glimpse while driving; the next, a pair of eider ducks in the harbour, cooing comically.

I was living midway between my parents and in the middle of their communications. Divorced a decade earlier, they used me to find out information about the other.

I tried to be okay, to relax and be grateful for what I had, but I kept being jolted by a lurching for more.

The same desire and self-belief that motivated me made me frustrated. The pain was a by-product of my ambition.

If you find yourself getting beat-up by the waves, you either need to go into the shallower water, or get away from the shore past the waves.

There were days when the loneliness built up and came spilling out in angry comments – often directed at the island. On nights when I was aching and alone, I wondered if this was the life I'd stopped drinking to live.

I needed to get away. I wanted an adult life, restaurants, sexiness, conversation and art. I wanted to meet new people who didn't know old things about me.

I got paid and had enough in my bank account to see me through a few months so decided to set sail. I gave notice on the lease of my flat and, in barely any time, got up early one morning to board the ferry.

I've always loved how it feels to leave: the motion of the ferry pulling away from the pier and the island, the bus setting off down the A9.

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As Scotland passes, in my notebook, my dream diary,
I write to the great love of my future, imagining lines
and declarations to a faceless, nameless fantasy:

I want to sleep in every room of your house.

I want to know a memory from every year of your life.

I will plot the curve of your back on graph paper.

*I will cut the letters of your name out of each day's
newspaper.*

*I want schoolchildren to recite the sequence of your
DNA.*