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# Archipelago

Written by Monique Roffey

Published by Simon & Schuster

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# ARCHIPELAGO

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SIMON &  
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London · New York · Sydney · Toronto · New Delhi

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First published in Great Britain by Simon & Schuster UK Ltd, 2012  
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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Simon & Schuster UK Ltd  
1st Floor  
222 Gray's Inn Road  
London WC1X 8HB

[www.simonandschuster.co.uk](http://www.simonandschuster.co.uk)

Simon & Schuster Australia, Sydney  
Simon & Schuster India, New Delhi

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available  
from the British Library

Hardback ISBN 978-1-84983-875-7  
Trade Paperback ISBN 978-0-85720-310-6  
Ebook ISBN 978-0-85720-312-0

Extract from 'Zero Circle' by Rumi from *Rumi: The Big Red Book*,  
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Typeset by Hewer Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by XXXX

THE PINK HOUSE

## CHAPTER ONE

### RAIN

The dog mumbles something under her breath.

*What* now, Gavin replies, as he goes about the kitchen in an aimless fashion. 7 p.m. Dinner should be on the table and she's trying to remind him. Animals have a keen sense of time.

Okay, okay, he says. The dog sits in the middle of the kitchen, trying not to slump over. Her chest is robust, yet she sits in a manner which suggests her stiff front legs are propping her up. Her triangular eyes are narrowed to slits; her tongue hangs from her dark mouth. She's making sure everything is all right, that they'll get through for the time being. She mumbles long and loud, a sound not dissimilar to his stomach when he's hungry.

Good girl, he says to her, not knowing if he needs or loves this dog any more.

Maccy cheese and chicken Vienna sausages will be their meal tonight. This is what his daughter likes.

They've eaten it the last three nights; very little else will tempt her. Maybe he'll add a tin of peas. She's lying in the huge double bed in their bedroom, like a mermaid on a raft, watching *Casper the Friendly Ghost*. November and it's still raining, popcorn rain, almost every day, short dense showers, ten minutes of a mauve downpour and then nothing. It falls from the mountains all around, unbidden, and makes him feel like he's done something wrong, like he's been in an argument and was the one to say all the stupid things.

He opens the tin of chicken sausages and winces at the stink. Like the innards of a gym shoe, a stale acid smell. He spills the brine out into the sink.

Here, have one of these, he says to the dog. He prongs a short brownpink sausage and holds it close to the dog's muzzle. She sniffs it but doesn't take a bite.

Go *on*, try it, he cajoles.

She sniffs again and puts her snout to the sausage. She nibbles it like a Japanese lady might nibble on a rose petal.

Oh, for God's sakes.

She takes the sausage carefully in her mouth and then slides to the floor and drops it on the lino. She looks up at him and mumbles.

Jesus Christ.

To be this close to collapse is a soft feeling. All his inner fibre, all his strength is ungluing and stretching and he can feel himself going stringy, like he could just come apart. It will be a tender experience, like falling in love. Yes, surely

dying, losing, failing, giving up, are similar to all the great uplifting feelings; surely dying is like being born.

He fills the saucepan with a jet of water, sits it on the hob and watches the ring turn candy red. The water is cloudy from the tap. As he watches it clear he puts his hand on his chest to check his heart. He scratches his beard. Black flies flit to the stove and he grabs the electric flyswatter, shaped like a small tennis racket. He swats one, *smack*, and the fly fries on the lines. It sizzles and forms a small black lump.

Ha, ha, *see*, he says to the dog. I'm still dangerous.

He swats another fly, smacking the racket down on the counter top. Another good shot, another sizzling sound. The racket smokes.

*Smack, smack*. Two more flies get mashed and charred. He picks at his T-shirt, and fans it against his stomach; a small sweat has broken out. Maybe he, Gavin Weald, isn't dying, after all. Maybe he is Godzilla, the Great Ape; maybe he will destroy and conquer all.

Daddy?

The dog looks round at the little girl in the hallway.

He looks at her too.

Yes, dou dou.

What's for dinner?

It's a surprise, he says, hiding the racket behind his back. He towers over her, and yet he feels her strength; she can make louder sounds than he can. She can sob for a whole night, not eat for days, throw tantrums which spin themselves from nowhere. Or spin themselves

from her new fear, the rain which bounds down from the hills. She is six and small and oh, so powerful.

I don't want a surprise.

You'll like this surprise, guaranteed.

She shakes her head which makes her blonde hair sway around her face.

What then?

Pizza.

Pizza? Since when did you prefer pizza?

With anchovies please.

You don't even know what an anchovy is.

Yes I do.

He drops to his knees. He holds the flyswatter like a real tennis racket, across his shoulder, affecting the style of a pro, forgetting the charred lumps.

What is an anchovy, then?

It's a fish.

Oh, he nods. This is unexpected. When did she learn about anchovies? Captain Nemo, yes, but an anchovy?

A fish? You mean like a whale?

Nooooo, she shrieks at his stupidity. They're tiny, like a shrimp.

A shrimp?

She laughs and her face glows. The dog's tail thumps the ground.

Océan, I'm sorry, but we don't have anchovies. Nor whales, nor any kind of fish, and anyway, anchovies taste horrible.

I love anchovies.



You've never even tried one!

Yes I have.

Look, we're having your favourite tonight, maccy cheese and . . . He looks at the sausage on the lino still between the dog's paws . . . And then we are having ice cream with peas. That was the surprise; I wasn't supposed to tell you. It's a secret recipe. Now go away – and leave me to cook.

Ha. She's outfoxed. Her face is pensive, trying to work out what to do next. He's losing his marbles and the one good thing about it is that he can now defuse a pre-tantrum six-year-old.

Go on now. She turns and he paddles her behind with the racket full of burnt flies.

She wanders back to the bedroom and the TV.

The water in the pan bubbles furiously and he opens a packet and throws the pasta in to boil and waits, stirring and stabbing it with a wooden spoon. When it's soft, he drains the tubes, throws them back in the pan. He takes the sachet of macaroni cheese mix and tears it open, sprinkling it in. The grey powder dissolves in a puff and the pasta coagulates into a stiff mess at the bottom. He pours in milk, adds a knob of butter. He prods and stirs, prising the pasta into separate pieces and the powder starts to become thinner and lighter in texture, like a miracle; it even starts to smell like cheese.

They eat together at the table. He doesn't attempt conversation for fear of where it might lead. Anchovies, rain. Mummy. Cheesy steam lifts from the pot of macaroni,

sedating them. Next to it, a bowl of grated cheddar, slices of bread and butter. He scoops some macaroni into her bowl and her eyes grow wide and dilated at the sight of the starchy goo.

Yum, yum, he says and means it. He sprinkles the real cheese on top and puts the bowl down in front of her. She holds her fork like a trident and gazes into the bowl, inhaling deeply. One day she'll fall asleep into her macaroni.

Yum, yum, he says again to himself, as he scoops a triple helping and takes a fistful of cheddar.

They both hum while eating their food. She sucks whole tubes down in one, blows them out onto the table. He doesn't care to correct her. He picks at his food and he strokes at his heart; he chews slowly, trying not to drift too far away. He especially tries not to think of the office, of what he'll have to face tomorrow, Monday.

They've been back in the house exactly twelve days. Twelve days within these pink walls. Tomorrow is day thirteen. When he thinks of the office nothing comes. He can't conjure up faces, 'to do' lists, Mrs Cyrus his secretary of ten years, anything. Where is it all, that part of him? He was doing so well, the CEO of a good-sized company; it feels like years ago. His head is light and there's a churning in the pit of his stomach.

Daddy, can I get down now?

Yes, pumpkin.

Will you watch TV with me?

Of course.

He dumps the dishes into the already dish-crammed sink and burps. The dog sits against the kitchen wall. He bends and strokes her behind the ears and she tilts her head for more. *Scratch, scratch*, good girl. Her bull terrier's nose is long and Roman, a pink patch at the end like a piece of a ballet shoe, worn satin; the tip of her nose is black and cold, reassuring to touch. He fights the urge to sit down on the floor and hug the dog close.

Come on then, Suzy. Let's watch TV, he says.

The dog gets up and he pats her side. She trots after him, tail up, and they both climb on to the kingsize bed with the little girl on it. The three of them form themselves into a kind of nest; the sheets around them are damp and smell of dog and feet. The Discovery Channel shows images of crocodiles in a place called Kakadu in Australia. Océan is transfixed. She is lying across his barrel chest and the dog is slumped across her legs. Immediately, as he tries to focus on the TV, his eyes feel heavy. Crocodiles, a creek somewhere, yellow eyes bulging from the water. Sleep arrives quickly and he doesn't try to fight it off; it's usual for him to end his days like this, with his daughter clinging to him, with the feeling, deep down, that it's the other way around.

\*

In the office on Monday his staff float around him. How much longer can they trust him? How much longer would *he* trust him if he were them? When will the Board

of Directors call him in, Steve or Mr Grant, the owner of the company; how much longer before they give him unrealistic targets, start to discuss his benefits? He is No. 3 in the company, the one hired to run everything; they can always replace a No. 3. At first there was time off. Curiosity, sympathy, cards, flowers. He didn't discuss any of it. It was a relief to finally get back to work.

In his private office, he examines his hands. They are feathered with dead grey skin stained here and there with yellow where he's splashed antiseptic ointment on the slits. The skin is now paper-thin. He can type, but holding a steering wheel is difficult, tying his laces is painful. His feet are the same, skin peeling off in welts. Psoriasis. It set in a few months after the flood. He's tried everything now, all the steroid creams, the pills, hard drugs packed full of chemicals which made his hair fall out, his pubes wither. He's started seeing an alternative doctor who can read his 'vibrations' on a little machine. He doesn't know or care exactly what this means. *You register a four*, the doctor says. Now he's been prescribed a glass of water every morning, with a squeeze of lime and a teaspoon of bicarbonate of soda to alkalise his body.

At 11 a.m. he walks to the coffee machine for his fourth cup. It's the coffee. If he could give up coffee, his one vice, all his other problems would come good. He knows this is an underlying truth, that he cannot give up this black toxic liquid. If he could put this one little thing right, he could put everything right.

He smiles at Petula at reception and her eyes fill with

love when she sees him; she's like a nun, so openly concerned, like a Mother Teresa. Only she has understood.

Hi Petula, he says and she beams. Petula, who is also so fertile – five kids. So fertile she can make her glasses fog up just sitting there all day. Petula who, like the dog, has come to run his life.

Doughnut today, Mr Weald?

No thanks.

Potato pie?

Oh God, no.

What I can get fer you?

Nothing. Thank you.

He is still full of last night's macaroni cheese. He waddles to the men's room and stands in the cubicle, counting to ten. When his eyes are open he can see tiny filmy black snakes in the air in front of him; floaters, the optician calls them. It's weird watching them; they look like bacteria breeding in a Petri dish. He closes his eyes and puts his fingers to his temples. He tries to steady himself but that rising panicking butterfly feeling threatens to get the better of him. He holds his head in his hands and counts.

When he hears the bathroom door open he unzips his flies and lets a steady torrent of saffron yellow urine cascade from him.

Pissing, *ahhh*, it's like a strange dull orgasm. Maybe he could move in with Petula and her kids. Each one of them has a different father. All good-for-nothing layabouts. Maybe they could form a pod, a kind of double

family. Or – better still, maybe they could all live together in his pink house. Petula appears to him, through a haze, her glasses sparkling, her smile beatific. *Potato pie?* Maybe she could still work on reception here, but also be a kind of flatmate. Could that work?

Mr Weald?

Uh – yes?

Mr Weald, is that you?

He panics, looking at his watch. Oh, *God*. A piercing realisation, no . . . no, please no. He has fallen asleep again, standing on his feet. His flies are still open, his dick hanging limp against his trousers. Petula. He was thinking of her and then . . .

Mr Weald?

Yes, I'm here. It sounds like Elston from the warehouse, a good man. He won't mention this to a soul.

You okay, Mr Weald?

He zips himself back up and opens the cubicle door.

Elston, I'm fine. Was I snoring?

Yes, Mr Weald.

Well, I'm fine. I just got a little lost in there; you know what it's like.

Elston's face is huge and incredulous.

Never mind, Gavin says quickly and leaves the men's. He goes back to his office and tells Mrs Cyrus not to bother him. He has piles of paperwork; he is expecting phone calls. He tells her to put no one through unless it's a dire emergency.

In his office he sits very still at his desk until his sense

of humiliation quells and his heart slows again. He says some kind of prayer and in that moment an image of his old boat shimmers before him. *Romany*. His 28-foot sloop, his old mistress, his great friend. He thinks of her sitting in the olive green water, her wooden deck, her upturned bow; he knows he's clutching at straws.

Gavin hides in his office all day. Hours of hot itchy hands and a racing heart and a mind slipping all over the place: images of *Romany*, the boat from his bachelor days, appear and disappear like a ghost boat in a haze. His old boat has been sitting moored at the yacht club for over a year now; they'd decided to sell her, finally. No time for boats any more, for sailing down the islands, for racing, nights gazing at the stars. His wife had never enjoyed sailing much. Then the flood came. By now, she is probably covered in pelican shit, full of rainwater.

He plays Solitaire online and then he plays Bridge. He checks Facebook seventeen times, checks for hurricanes, for sightings of UFOs, for information about Kakadu; then he finds all this checking makes his head spin even more. At 5 p.m., on the dot, he logs out and leaves the office without looking Mrs Cyrus in the eye.

\*

At home Gavin stands on the lawn and scrutinises the pink garden walls. Seven feet high now, with buttresses, steel-enforced. Nothing will knock over these pink walls. What colour were they before? He can't remember;

mostly they were covered with orange trumpety flowers, a climbing plant of some sort, other shrubs. Now the walls are candy pink, princess-pink, to make his daughter happy. She chose these walls. He looks up and sniffs, he can smell the rain arriving anytime soon. The sky is heavy with thunderheads about to burst; the rainy season is a month from being over.

Daddy? Océan comes to him and holds onto his legs.

Yes, dou dou.

Can we have meatballs for dinner?

Yes, we can have meatballs.

Can Suzy have meatballs too?

Of course. How was school?

Okay.

He sits down on the step of the porch and hoists her onto his lap. The dog appears from round the corner; she trots over to them, mumbles something, and then flumps over onto her side.

We made butter today at school.

Really?

I have it in my school bag.

Show me.

She jumps off him, fetches her school bag and digs around in it, producing a small plastic yoghurt pot with, yes, a creamy pool at the bottom.

It has to go in the fridge, she explains.

He's impressed. Butter? Anchovies? This is what a private education is buying.

Go and put it in the fridge and we can have some



tonight on toast, then come back here and tell me all about how you made it.

She skips off.

A peal of thunder from the sky.

The dog replies with a low growl. He gets up and walks out onto the lawn again and shivers. He's done something wrong, but he doesn't know what. The world is tetchy with him, but why? How did he end up like this; when, at what moment, did he make the wrong choice, end up here, gazing at these pink walls?

A fat spot of rain hits him hard on the centre of his head. The clouds are low, troubled. Another rumble. *Stop*, he shouts. But the rain falls quickly down on him, as if unzipped from a valise. In seconds he's drenched, but he doesn't bother to get under cover. The rain falls down on him in a low consistent thrum; it's only just begun. November rain in Trinidad. Then it picks up, falling louder from the clouds, long fluid ropes of tropical rain. He clenches his fists, seized by a rage for this rain, for its spite, its ridicule of him. How could rain make him feel so – weak? From inside the house he can hear another sound, louder than the rain, the screaming of his little girl.

\*

In the morning he wakes with the dog and the child snoring lightly next to him. Each has found a space on the bed. Océan is spread like a starfish, on her stomach; the

dog is close to falling off the edge. His sheets have knotted up and wound themselves around his legs. The radio clock says 5.30 a.m. A ceiling fan whirs overhead, stirring up the air. There's that sullen brooding feeling beyond the louvres, like the rain never went away.

He needs help. He realises this, has been coming to the conclusion for months. He needs his own private team. Not just Josephine once a week to mop and dust and change the sheets, not just Petula. He needs a chef, a dietician, a psychotherapist, a specialist dermatologist, a hypnotherapist to get him off the coffee, a masseur; and he needs to pay someone, a woman, for a hug every now and then, maybe even more. He is a man and he isn't coping. His wife made him healthy, stable. Now he is half-himself, not himself. Pathetic. Who the fuck is he, without her?

Only mornings can be innocent, just before light. This is the quiet time before it all happens, before anything starts, this half an hour before he has to rise and begin over again. These are his quiet moments, the only time he has to himself, and it's not enough for him to regroup, to think straight. He cannot figure out another plan in this tiny space of half an hour every morning before the merry-go-round starts again.

All he can do is admire his little girl; how on earth did he produce such an exquisite creature? Him so dark and curly-haired, olive-skinned. When they stand together it looks like he stole her from another family; she's like a fairy girl, her hair like silver seaweed and her mother's

grey-blue eyes, her mother's pale skin. It was his idea to name her Océan, after the sea.

The dog snuffles and rolls over and falls in slow motion off the bed, landing on her sturdy feet. She farts and stretches and yawns, then climbs back onto the bed and curls herself back into her dreams. Outside, he can hear the patter of light rain and he feels himself freeze: will it wake her up? Dear God, no, please, and with these thoughts he sees his daughter's eyelids flicker, as if she now has some internal radar for rain. Her eyes shoot open wide. Her mouth opens and she screams and screams for her mother, *where is my mummy*, she wails. And it's not fair, because he cannot be her mother, not that.

She's screaming now, so bad, he sometimes fears what the neighbours might think, even though they know; they were there, too, in the flood.

Dou dou, shhhh, he tries, but it's useless. She is screaming herself awake, into consciousness. The dog barks and jumps from the bed and trots outside to bark at the rain and it's then, in the chaos of her screams, that he knows what to do, how to save them.