

SLIP OF A FISH

Amy Arnold



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The first time we went out together, Abbott took me to see a film about a man who didn't want his wife to get pregnant. The film was set in Utsjoki, in northern Finland. Utsjoki was dark. That's to say the sun didn't come up for the whole ninety-seven minutes. The actors were floating around, or rather, seemed to be floating around on backgrounds of greys and blues. Blues so deep it wasn't easy to be sure they really were blue.

Abbott spent the entire time shifting in his seat, tilting his head at different angles. I could tell he thought there was a problem with his eyes or his glasses. He kept taking them off and putting them back on again, wiping the lenses on his shirt, on his jeans, then holding them up to the light. There wasn't much light to hold them up to. All the disruption was making it difficult to concentrate on reading the subtitles, so I tapped him on the shoulder. I was planning to tell him a bit about the polar night. I thought it would help, I thought an explanation would reassure him.

The sun sits below the horizon in winter. For weeks. That's why everything's dark.

That's what I planned to say, and I was ready to say it. I must have been. I think what I actually said was that it wasn't unusual for small cinemas to have problems with their screens, and I gestured into the darkness. Whatever I said must have had an effect, because his fiddling and shuffling stopped after that. When I tapped him on the shoulder again, although I

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can't remember why now, he said there was no need to tap, there was no need to whisper either.

'Look around, Ash,' he said. 'We've got the cinema to ourselves.'

I wanted to add Utsjoki to my word collection. I wasn't sure whether it would count. I didn't have any other proper nouns, or foreign words for that matter, although I'd wanted ingénue for a long time.

'It's your collection,' Abbott said on the drive home. 'You decide.'

I couldn't decide.

'I don't know,' I said.

'Well, what are the rules?' he said.

And whilst I was thinking he said, 'That was really off, having a vasectomy without telling her, don't you think?'

'There's only one rule,' I said. 'I have to hear someone say the word.'

I took a deep breath. I waited for him to speak, and when he didn't, I went on.

'Finding the right word is like finding the right pebble,' I said.

What I meant was, finding the right pebble on a whole beach of pebbles. Thinking about it now, I'm glad I stopped there. I was getting carried away, flinging analogies around like that.

'So, shall I put it in?' I said.

He thought for a while. I thought for a while. We thought for the time it took the traffic lights to turn green. I was thinking about the time Papa and I were looking for the right pebble.

'But how will we know it when we see it?' I said.

Twice I asked him, maybe three times.

Abbott let the handbrake off.

'Put it in. Utsjoki,' he said. 'Why not?'

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He let go of the wheel and made a sort of flicking gesture with his hand to show how laid-back he was about it. I put Utsjoki in. I didn't have many words beginning with u and it was the only one where t, s and j ran into each other.

'You can't get bored of it, can you?' I said.

Abbott checked the rear-view mirror, then signalled.

'Uts, Utsjo, Utsjoki,' I said.

He looked over his shoulder and pulled onto the dual carriageway. He breathed out.

'It's the sound of the o after the j that makes it. Like box, or socks, but more Nordic. Don't you think?' I said.

I spoke a lot in those days. I was always speaking.

I managed to get hold of a book called *Towns and Villages Inside the Arctic Circle* after that. The book had a whole chapter devoted to Utsjoki. 'Utsjoki: Finland's Most Northerly Municipality'. Yes, I still liked the sound of the o after the j, because that's what got me started, and you should never forget the things that get you started, but what I really liked, perhaps even more, was the idea of endless daylight.

In summer, the sun stays above the horizon for seventy-one days. Endless daylight.

Those were the words in the book. Endless daylight had a whole sentence to itself. The author, Jari, and I think his surname was Joki, must have known how good it sounded. He must have felt brave letting it stand on its own like that. Endless daylight, full stop. Yes.

I kept the book on the coffee table. Displayed it, you could say, although Abbott was the only one who ever came over. Still, when he did, he picked it up and read the back cover.

'Utsjoki's in there,' I said, leaning into the jo to help him remember. Utsjoki from the film.

I don't think he heard me because he said he hadn't known there was a series of *Towns Inside* books when he'd

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treated himself to a copy of *Towns Inside the M25* on his last birthday.

'It's been so useful to have all the London commute times and prices in one place,' he said.

'But Tilstoke's almost a hundred and fifty miles north of the M25,' I said.

'Well,' he said. 'You never know.'

I took the book up to my bedroom. Summer was on its way, and it felt right to have it beside my bed, where I could dip into it before sleeping. Seventy-one days of endless daylight. Endless daylight. Full stop. One thousand, seven hundred and four consecutive hours of it. Enough hours to warrant telling Abbott, but I had the impression he didn't want to know much more about Utsjoki, and I wasn't ready to hear him say something about how it would even out in the end.

All that daylight.

I went on reading about towns and villages inside the Arctic Circle anyway. To be honest, I couldn't stop reading, and the thing about endless daylight was true, because on page fifty-seven there was a photo of people swimming in a lake after midnight.

Swimming in Kevojärvi after midnight.

That was the caption. It didn't look like daytime in the photo. It didn't look much like night-time either. I suppose it might have looked like twilight if I'd known how twilight looked. Still, it started something inside me, that photo, a sort of tug north you could say. It could have been the light, or the two people wading, the ones nearest the camera. Whatever it was, I couldn't stop thinking about swimming in Kevojärvi at night. I thought about it when everyone inside the M25 was sleeping. When they were sleeping or worrying, because darkness brings both. And maybe that's what it was about Kevojärvi, about Utsjoki, about endless daylight. Seventy-one

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days without worry, although it probably all evens out in the end.

I thought about Utsjoki again after Charlie was born. Especially after Charlie was born. I decided it couldn't hurt to bring up the subject with Abbott again. After all, it had been a long time since we'd seen the film and he might have forgotten the things I'd mentioned before. We were tucked up in bed reading, and Charlie was sleeping. It seemed like a good time to begin.

'In summer, the locals swim in the lake at night,' I said. 'It's warm enough. That's where they swim, in the lake. In Kevojärvi.'

I had the book ready to show him. I'd folded the page with the photo of Kevojärvi and I had my thumb in the page I'd folded. There were seven people in the water. Two of them were wading and the others were swimming. The ones who were swimming were quite far out. The pair who were wading were close to the camera, but I couldn't tell whether they were men or women. It was one of the things I wanted to ask Abbott. Look at these two wading, I'd planned to say. Do you think they're men or women? Boys, perhaps?

I'd told him the lake was called Kevojärvi. I'd taken the time to learn how to pronounce it properly and I was about to show him the photo. I had the book in my hand, I was moving it towards him. I had the page folded over ready, my thumb in the page.

'Kevojärvi?' he said.

'Yes,' I said. I crossed my fingers under the duvet.

'I thought you loved Tilstoke Baths.'

'Yes,' I said. 'Yes.'

Charlie loves swimming in here. The lake off the Toll Estate. The only other people who swim here come on a Tuesday morning, it's a club or something. There are *Private* signs on the banks. There are signs on poles in the water. One says *No Swimming Unsupervised*, the other has a figure swimming in a red circle with a line through it, and you can't tell whether the swimmer's a boy or a girl, but Charlie says it doesn't matter.

'It just means no swimming, that's all,' she says.

You can swim here though, unless it's a Tuesday. It's fine to swim, and nobody checks.

And now Charlie's on the rock. She's thirty metres out. Fifteen strokes, if you're good. If you know how to breathe underwater.

There she is. Charlie, light of my life, fire of my heart.

I know. Of course I know, but it's fun, it's a game. Whatever Papa said about taking lines. Lines from stories, from poetry, from fables, myths, yarns, histories, speeches.

'It's like plucking feathers from a bird,' he said. 'You can't just –'

'But you aren't. Not if you take them and change them a bit. You aren't plucking, you're playing.'

'Come on, come on in,' Charlie says.

And I will. First though, I'll open my arms. To the lake, to the sky, to the beginning-of-summer sun. I'll gather them in.

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'Are you swimming? Ash, are you swimming?'

Swimming, of course, and look at the water with the sun on it. Brown or green or yellow, all three colours, some other colour, dappled, maybe, but I've never known what to do with adjectives. I told Kate too, I said it straight out. But still. She wanted me to choose. Happy, sad, angry, confused? She said it would help her understand.

And what is the word? There probably isn't a word for the colour of lake water under the sun. There doesn't have to be a word, although it feels as though there should be. Most people think Eskimos have fifty words for snow, but they don't. It's myth, a hoax, that's what it is. Some things, a lot of things I suppose, are untranslatable. Anyway. It's May. It's a sun-through-the-leaves-on-the-water kind of day, and warm enough to swim at last.

'Are you coming or what? Ash?'

She's crouching on the rock. She's gripping the rock with bare feet, and the water beneath is brown or green or yellow. Dappled, probably.

'Come on, I'm getting cold. Just swim.'

'I'm keeping my T-shirt on,' I say, although nobody ever comes, except on a Tuesday, and it isn't a Tuesday today. We always swim with T-shirts on anyway, because Charlie once thought she heard some boys. She thought they might have come down from the Toll Estate. She thought they might have left their bikes on the bank, rolled up their jeans, paddled in, taken pebbles, stones, thrown them, watched them disappear. But we'd swum far out, too far out to be sure.

'Listen. Boys,' Charlie said, turning onto her back.

We listened. We stopped swimming to listen, but they weren't boys, they were gulls.

'Ash. Are you coming? Are you coming, or staying?' she says.

'Coming, stay where you are.'

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Brown, green, yellow, one arm then the other, swum it so many times I know where to come up, fifteen strokes, one breath, to end up here, right here, in front of the rock. See.

‘Without goggles,’ she says. ‘How do you always know?’

‘You shouldn’t swim in there,’ Abbott says. ‘Especially not with Charlie.’

He’s fiddling with the skylight.

‘It’s not even clean, that lake, and anyway, you’re not supposed to. It’s private. There are signs.’

He pulls the bar to open it, then pushes. Pushes twice to get it to shut.

‘Ash. There are signs, you know. She’d be better off at the baths,’ he says, opening, then shutting. Taking two pushes.

‘I thought so,’ he says, adjusting his glasses. ‘We’re going to need a new striking plate.’

The day he decided on the skylight he came home from work with a pile of brochures tucked under his arm.

‘What do you think to these?’ he said, putting them on the kitchen table with emphasis. I say with emphasis, because that’s how he did it. He did it with so much emphasis that two of the Play-Doh cows Charlie and I had been making wobbled, then fell over.

I’d always wanted a bedroom in the roof. I must have said something like that before he came home with the brochures, although I can’t remember saying anything.

‘It’s for you Ash, for you,’ he kept saying as he flicked through the pages. ‘People go for skylights these days. And if we ever move . . .’

I wondered if he was still thinking about towns inside the M25. I kissed him. I wanted to. He was being kind. He was being kind, but his brochures took up space on the table.

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So I stacked them up and put Charlie's cows back when he wasn't looking.

He was so happy the day the skylight men came. I swear I saw him take a little skip when the van saying *Whole-Lite Windows* pulled up outside our house.

'They're here, they're here,' he called out, and ran downstairs.

That's when I saw him take a little skip. Charlie saw it too, she said so later when we were sitting by the lake. He drank tea with the men from the van and nodded his approval of hinges and ventilation flaps. He said it was like having old friends over, although we didn't have any old friends.

The men worked on the skylight for two days. On the second day, Joan from number four came over to see what all the fuss was about. Abbott made her a cup of tea.

'You need to see it from outside and in, if you really want to get a feel for what a skylight brings to a home,' he said to her.

Joan said it was exactly what she wanted, to get a feel for it, and she followed him upstairs even though her knees were playing up.

'The things I do,' she said, and winked at Charlie.

Charlie and I went out. We walked down our hill to the lake. The swallows had already left. We sat on our coats on the bank and waited for the geese to come in. It was the best sort of autumn day. The right sort of day for geese. I remember the sky, shocked blue by the low sun, there would've been a tailwind too. Charlie talked and I listened. Charlie talked on, the way she does, and when there wasn't enough light to see across the lake we picked up our coats and walked home. The geese hadn't come. We agreed they probably wouldn't.

'Not today, anyway,' Charlie said, and squeezed my hand. 'Probably tomorrow.'

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When we got to the top of our hill Joan was there, sitting on her front step smoking. She stubbed out her cigarette when she saw us. She sent the last puff of smoke into the air and watched it go. She was always sending puffs of smoke into the air.

'People go for skylights these days,' she said, getting up and rubbing her knees. 'Bespoke too. Adds value, should you ever want to move. Go down south.'

She called it commuter country, and she went on talking, and whilst she was talking Charlie was pulling at my hand, pulling it away from Joan, towards our house. She was saying, come on, come on, but how was I supposed to come on when Joan was talking, talking, and anyway, it was Joan who put a stop to it in the end.

'Ash,' she said. 'Your little 'un wants to get back.'

When we got home the front door was open, wide open, and Abbott was swinging in and out of it like a Newton's cradle ball. He went in and out, checking on the skylight, inside and outside. Inside, then outside. When the van finally pulled away he called us all together.

'Put Charlie's coat on,' he said. 'We're going outside.'

We went outside and stood in the street. Abbott hoisted Charlie onto his shoulders and looked up into the sky. I looked up too. I wondered if Abbott knew something about geese that I didn't. He was looking up and nodding as if he knew, as if he'd heard from 1,500 miles the first flap of wings, as if he'd held on to it all the way across the Norwegian Sea. That's how he looked.

'Well,' he said.

I held my breath and counted to three. I thought we were all expecting the same thing. He got hold of my sleeve and pulled me towards him. He pointed to the skylight.

'What do you think of that then?' he said.