

The Contingency Plan-Play 2: Resilience

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Norfolk, September. As before, a table is laid with tablecloth, but now places are set for two; as before, the hurricane lamp. We sense a quickening of the wind and the sea is louder than before. Robin sits with binoculars. Suddenly the cry of an egret.

Robin Where are you now?

He scans around with his binoculars.

Pretty beggar. Preening yourself now? No, you ought to clear off, clear out of here. This is gonna catch you napping, southerner. This ain't the Rance here! Not the Bay of Biscay!

That's the North Sea there. The German Ocean. Cold sea. This is Northern Europe. This not your latitude.

The beating of wings, somewhere.

That's it, that's the way, fuck off, fuck back off to France or Spain, good girl.

Jenny *walks on with dinner.*

Jenny It can't hear you.

Robin No.

Jenny Nor can it comprehend you.

Robin No.

Jenny And swearing at birds is a sure sign of early-onset dementia.

He laughs.

Okay, here we are.⁶⁷Sea bass. In sea salt. On a bed of our parsley. My spuds.

Robin My word, look at that. Ah, not the lovely 'Nicola' spuds?

Jenny Yes, the lovely Nicola.

Robin Creamy, yet firm Nicola.

Jenny Don't be creepy, Rob, it's a potato. But I think you'll find the *coup de grâce* is sea-kale, fried in garlic with pine nuts and a splash of lemon.

Robin Anything to mask the bitterness. Shall I be Ainsley?

Jenny You be Ainsley, yes.

He tastes it, plays up the whole TV-chef thing.

Robin So the astringent, even sour taste of the sea-kale, its native rough-hewn texture is offset brilliantly by the acetic acid of the lemon and then, in a masterstroke, further neutralised by the tang of garlic until in effect, the entire taste of the sea-kale has been – obliterated.

Jenny You bugger, it has a lovely taste.

Robin It does, it does.

Jenny Tastes of here.

She sits. They start to eat.

Robin Yeah. Yes, it does. It's fabulous. It's fabulous.

Jenny Mmm.

Robin Those spuds are – God!

Jenny They just love that soil. Thrive in it.

Robin It's the mix of salt and wind-blown earth –

Jenny And I think it's all the bird dung actually.

⁶⁸

Robin And that kale. Now, I did that kale a disservice.

Jenny I did debone the fish but watch out for any – remnants, any –

The telephone rings in the house.

Shall we ignore that?

Robin Let it go to message.

Jenny Yes.

Pause. It rings. Robin eats, Jenny stops.

I suppose we should at least update him.

Robin On what?

Jenny Nothing, no.

Pause. It rings.

Robin Wouldn't want to distract him from his numerous duties.

Jenny No. That would be wrong.

Pause. We hear a message being left, inaudible. Jenny picks at her food.

Jenny Funnily enough, I saw him on the news.

Robin Why were you watching the news?

Jenny I happened to put it on. And he came across well. No. Tetchy. Impatient.

Robin I expect the questions were moronic.

Jenny Actually he came across well at first. He was the only one who seemed to know what they were talking about. Wearing a suit too. I've only seen him in a suit once, when he wore your old DJ, when he graduated.⁶⁹ Do you remember? Far too small. I had to let down the sleeves. He insisted on this clip-on dickie bow. But here, he had a new suit, I bet she chose it for him.

Robin Probably some advisor.

Jenny He hadn't properly brushed his hair. He looked like he does when he's just woken up. He never considers his hair. Like a child.

Robin That sort of thing goes down well. With the media. Comical hair. Mad scientists.

Jenny Yet, my God, he was clear. Authoritative.

Robin That's the problem, isn't it.

Jenny Mmm. What? Why's that a problem?

Robin He's there to make things plausible.

Jenny Isn't it good to have him in there, it must be good?

Robin We're not discussing this, Jenny.

Jenny I suppose a part of me just thinks that must be good.

Robin He should be doing science, not speaking for 'science'. You never see politicians these days. Only scientists speaking for them, cleaning up after them.

Jenny There was a lot of confusion about tonight. About how bad tonight could be.

Robin They have not the faintest idea what will happen tonight.

Pause.

Jenny We're not talking about this.

Robin No, we're not.

Jenny My fault. I brought it up.

Robin Yes. Eat your gorgeous meal.

Jenny Yes.⁷⁰

Pause. She stops eating and toys with the food.

So where's it reached now?

Robin Oh. I don't know. Spurn Head, I expect.

Jenny So that's...?

Robin An hour away, maybe.

Jenny An hour! Only an hour. And yet it feels – still.

Robin The wind's quickening. Look at the sea. Getting more turbulent. And there, look at the cloud banks to the north.

Jenny Those are angry clouds. I love that effect. The sun, backlighting them. They stand out, in relief.

Robin Yes, very pretty.

Jenny Will kept talking about surges.

Robin There. What would he know about that? Is he an oceanologist? Generalising, creating pointless ignorant panic?

Jenny He got rather plaintive trying to explain it. Poor lamb. You know how he blushes, when he's angry, like you, as if you find it impossible to imagine that what you're saying could be misunderstood.

Robin Look, tonight's about here, right? Thirty-seven years. It's about building dams, clearing ground, it's about all of that.

Jenny Yes.

Robin Thirty-seven years of love and work.

Jenny Yes.

Robin A ruined watchhouse, a hectare of wetland, you and me both. Without us, what would be here?

Jenny A row of holiday homes and a hideous sea wall.

Pause.

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Robin Ah. You know what. I forgot to open this. Bugger.

He pulls a bottle of wine from a bucket.

Been saving it for a rainy day.

Jenny I think this'll pass for that, love.

He opens it expertly. Pours her a glass. She drinks, coughs, spits it out.

What is this?

He pats her back. Drinks it himself.

Robin Elderflower wine. *Vin '74*. Smelt of hay, looked like urine.

Jenny Where did you find that? It's disgusting.

Robin Still good... to taste. Kept it.

Jenny It's gone off. Pour it away. Robin. You idiot. Could be toxic.

Robin I think it's matured nicely.

Jenny It's full of rot and sediment. Urghh!

She drinks water. Laughs.

You idiot! Fared better than your Norfolk ale, anyway.

Robin Oh yes, the Norfolk ale!

Jenny The reek of it, of the malt.

Robin Oh, and that summer of the gas build-up, the bloody – fermentation –

Jenny Oh God, yes, you, you running around with these –

Robin– exploding bloody –

Jenny– ice-cream soda bottles of –

Robin– foaming out like –

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Jenny– the sight of you –

Robin– Will, screaming at me!

They laugh.

Jenny And what, what did it taste like?

Robin Sour tea, sour bloody tea!

Jenny And it left such a stain on your teeth.

Robin Okay, it was an abortive... experiment. God, yeah.

Pause.

Jenny And I look back on those days, I dunno, with incredible fondness.

Robin Do you?

Jenny Of course I do.

Robin I sort of thought I'd forced you into –

Jenny Nobody forces me into anything. Did I ever suggest that?

Robin You would have been justified...

Jenny I made it my life, didn't I? Didn't I?

Robin Yeah. Yes, you absolutely did. And I thank you for it, Jenny.

Jenny Working all day and then sleeping so deeply.

Robin You know I didn't believe in it. That it would work.

Jenny Oh, he tells me that now.

Robin Truly I didn't. Not until the birds came. When the birds came, then I knew it would be okay.

Jenny Those harriers, yes, the marsh, the marsh harrier. That hen harrier even – they loved that dead ash tree, I was all for felling it, you said let it stand, and they loved it, that ash tree.⁷³ It was a sort of benediction, their choosing us.

Robin No, no religious stuff, we simply got the conditions right.

Jenny Isn't it a miracle, them finding our hectare out of all that land, choosing us?

Robin Just so little left elsewhere, the freshwater lagoon, the salt marsh, the dunes, the habitat. Give them an inch and they take it. I mean, where'll they go now? No. Sorry.

Suddenly a siren calls, off. They stop eating for a moment.

Robin I don't see what purpose that serves.

Jenny No.

Pause.

Presumably they don't sound it for fun.

Robin It's just procedure. Don't want to get sued if anyone gets the slightest bit wet.

Jenny I've never heard it before.

Robin It signifies panic and we're not going to panic.

Jenny Yes. They're just covering themselves.

Robin If they were serious there would be helicopters, house-to-house evacuations.

Jenny Will said there would be, there would be evacuations.

Robin It's a matter of individual discretion.

Jenny Right. Look, you can see, hardly a breeze. Must be some way off.

Robin The irony of this whole thing is the reaction is worse than the problem.

⁷⁴

Jenny Yes. Yes. Frightening people out of their houses. On a weekend.

Robin Exactly.

Jenny Must be a field day for, say, burglars.

Robin Of course.

The siren again.

Now that is fatuous.

Jenny Oh, he claimed it would exceed 1953. Will.

Robin No chance.

Jenny Because, he said rising sea levels would make it more lethal.

Robin This is the whole thing. They want authoritative statements and you are compelled and you can't blame Will for this, you are compelled to give these closed answers, do you discuss probability, no, risk, no and then you end up looking a fool. Abusing your position.

Jenny Yes.

Robin Disgracing yourself.

Jenny Yes.

Pause.

Scared the birds too, look.

Robin Yes, yes, it has, look at them, look at the –

The sound of hundreds of drumming wing-beats as a huge flock of geese alights and circles; it's incredibly loud.

Oh God. The Canada geese!

Jenny My God. Must be two hundred!

Robin Must be at least two hundred! The noise!

Jenny I didn't know we had so – ! Wow!

Robin Look, the lapwings too, look!

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Jenny Even the lapwings!

Robin And the martins! The teal!

Jenny Must be five-hundred-odd birds!

Robin And there, the oystercatchers too –

Jenny Off, off –

Robin Off again, off. Weeks early.

Jenny Swallows gone, martins gone.

Robin Even the avocets've –

Pause. The sound fades away.

Robin *is tearful; he returns to his meal. Eats on.*

Jenny *stands.*

Finish it. It'll grow cold.

Jenny Mmm.

Robin As you put so much effort in. Finish it.

Jenny Never heard it so quiet.

Robin Oh, where did you get the sea bass? From Cley? Such a clean taste. The wine too.

Jenny Finish it. Please.

She sits down, toys with the food.

Jenny Not a car on the road.

Robin How it should be. Quiet.

Jenny Why's the coast so dark?

Robin No traffic noise, no light pollution. They should do this more often.

Jenny No, look, no lights to the west.

Robin You should be delighted. Talk about 'cut your carbon'. 76 Are you really not going to finish that?

She shakes her head.

Well, that's a terrible... waste.

He moves her plate across, eats for her.

Ah, you let it go cold.

Jenny What?

Robin What a bloody waste. Really.

Jenny Sorry. I'm sorry. Sorry. There's more in –

Robin No. No, I'm fine. Fine.

Pause. A more muted siren now from further down the coast.

Jenny Is that Lynn now?

Robin *nods his head.*

Don't they evacuate? Or check? They probably assume we're not here. How would they know? Aren't they meant to do a house-to-house?

Robin Doubt they'll bother with us.

Jenny But what'll we do if they come?

Robin No, they won't.

Jenny What do you mean?

Robin I mean, I just mean they can't.

Jenny Of course they can if they want to. Why can't they?

Robin Well.

Jenny Rob? Why couldn't they come? Robin.Robin! Why can't they come?

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Robin Well. Because I blocked the road. The approach road.

Pause.

Jenny What? You – what? How?

Robin Towed the old boat up. On the trailer. Laid it across.

Jenny You blocked the approach road?

Robin They could walk past it, of course. Just not offering any encouragement. Not that they'll come anyway.

Jenny Okay. Why, why did you do that, Rob? What if we wanted to – drive, say?

Robin Where, where would we drive to, where?

Jenny Sorry, you blocked the approach road?

Robin You're repeating yourself. We've nowhere worth going. We've got no good reason to go. We don't want them coming and intervening. Shifting us somewhere that means nothing to us. No. We'll be fine here.

Jenny The defences will protect us.

Robin Well, they are, as I've often said, part of the problem. Be fascinating to see how the sea behaves without obstacles like that.

Jenny Without the defences?

Robin Mmm.

Jenny Why would we be without the defences?

Robin I breached them. Well, I, you know, I let them fall into disrepair. The groins were pretty rotten anyway. More benign neglect. Because actually in April they held up.78So that night proved inconclusive.

Jenny In what respect?

Robin Oh, you know. In terms of the plan.

Pause.

Jenny What are we doing?

Robin You know what we're doing.

Jenny I don't, no, Rob, I don't think I do. I mean, what are we really doing? Answer me. Truly.

Pause.

I mean, have you lied to me about tonight?

Robin No. Nothing is sure, of course.

Jenny You're sure.

Robin How could I be? Am I an oceanologist? I've the barest knowledge of tidal action. Incredibly basic. And I'm no meteorologist. These things, to understand them, you need such powerful models, you need satellite tracking, they generally get it wrong.

Jenny But if they haven't, what are we doing?

Robin Sticking it out. Seeing it out. We're sticking it out. Finishing our supper. Drinking a bottle of wine. Seeing it through, love. It's fine, absolutely – just go over the plan.

Jenny What?

Robin Just repeat the procedures we agreed. Jenny.

She sits.

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Jenny Yes. Yes. Okay. Everything is moved upstairs.

Robin Yes. And?

Jenny Turned off the gas, electricity, water –

Robin Paperwork?

Jenny Yep. Got the insurance documents on me –

Robin All items of personal, all treasured items –

Jenny Packed our bags with a change of clothes –

Robin Put plugs in the sinks –

Jenny– the bath –

Robin Plugged the water inlet pipes with towels –

Jenny Disconnected the washing machine –

Robin Bottles of fresh water, torch, first-aid kit, tinned food – yes. Yes?

Jenny Yes.

Pause.

Robin So it's fine, right?

Jenny Yes.

Robin So, let's eat our pudding, shall we?

Jenny Yes.

The phone rings in the house.

Robin We should disconnect that bloody –

Jenny I'll –

Robin No, it's fine. Let me go and –

Jenny Perhaps, Rob, perhaps we should stay in touch.

Robin With who exactly?

Robin 's gone in. **Jenny**, alone, pulls out her mobile. She calls, watching the house at all times. She can't get through.

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Jenny Oh, fuck it. Fuck it. How do you...?

She tries to text.

Hang on, where's her...? Okay – good – oh no, not that – 'Change message'? Yes, yes. Okay.

Hang on. Err. S-E-A – err – R-O-B –

She fumbles away.

No, not that, no – where's – 'Delete'? Hang on. This is – 'N-O' – no, 'SEA ROB NO'? No, no.

Robin *re-enters.*

Robin What have you got there?

Jenny Oh, Rob. Course, you never saw this.

Robin How did you come by that phone?

Jenny And then I could just inform him, I have been thinking, regardless of tonight, whatever happens tonight, I was thinking we should, that we have been very hasty, and I blame myself, I am a large part of that –

Robin *seizes the phone.*

Rob, don't – I'm sending –

Robin You don't need that, love.

Jenny Rob, give us that –

She takes it back and sends the message; he snatches it back.

– that's my phone.

Robin You don't need it.

Jenny Robin, really this is bloody stupid.

Robin No, no, love. What's this? Okay.

Robin *starts to dismantle it.*

The SIM card, is it?

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Jenny I just wanted it in case of –

Robin Get that case off. They have tin in them, don't they? Paradium?

Jenny What are you doing to it?

Robin Can break that down. Break it down into its components. So shoddy, look at it, where's it from? China? Look. It's cheapjack shit, isn't it. Jenny – where will this go to die? Tin. Gold on the PCB. Plastics.

He places the disassembled phone on the table.

Could probably make use of that SIM card.

Jenny I'll call from the house then, fine.

He shows her the cord from the telephone.

Robin I was finding that distracting.

Jenny Rob!

Robin What we need to remember is we did this alone. That we are entirely alone. Being alone is actually our strength. If we can prevail alone we will be stronger. Sorry, love.

Pause.

Jenny I see. Could we, could we not at least let him know what we're doing?

Robin What's he going to do? What's he going to do about it? What could he even do? What'll you say to him?

Jenny Well, could we not at least say we may have been right but that he's our son, he remains our son? Or maybe say that, okay, let's try again, bring her over, Sarika, yes, we perhaps misjudged her, yes, even that, she loves him, she saw things 82 in him, and that we acknowledge he's my only, our only son – oh, what are we doing to ourselves here?

Pause.

Robin I don't think we ate our pudding, did we?

Pause.

Jenny Okay, I will walk up the approach road and if you have any sense, any modicum of sense –

Robin You're frightened, Jenny.

Jenny Yes, Rob, yes I am, yes I am frightened, yes.

Robin Why?

Jenny Err, why? Well. It's the sea, Rob. Yes. I don't, I just don't recognise it.

Robin It's just a little swollen.

Jenny No, I don't recognise it. Fine. It doesn't recognise me. I mean, anyway, human beings can move, right. We are not trees. We've choices in the matter. We've a duty to make a choice, have we not? Ah, look. The lights are gone in the – down the east coast. Everywhere.

Robin I'll bet they power down at Sizewell.

Jenny Right.

Robin Ah. Listen to that quiet. When was it last as quiet as that? I can hear insects ticking, the movement of marram grass, I can hear the current sucking... No, I didn't ever lie to you, Jenny. Told you a partial truth, maybe. I mean, leaving this? Can't be done. 83 Be like a fish trying to swim in air, yeah? This, this is our habitat, Jen. How could we live outside our element, tell me that?

She approaches him.

Jenny Robin, let's walk up the lane, go up the ridge. Robin, you've got another thirty good years in you. You don't believe in fate, do you? Robin. So this is a natural thing. You're right. Letting go. Retreat. Think how this has changed, the coast moving, retreating and advancing, think of it. It's no defeat to walk away from that, is it, love? It's no defeat to admit the past's mistakes, to give way to love, that's being human, isn't it, doing that?

Robin You go. Yeah. You just go.

Jenny Come with me.

Robin I'm fine.

Jenny Come with me.

Robin No, I'm good here, snug here. Ringside seat. Seriously. You're right. Been gearing up for this for thirty-seven years. You're right. Relish the idea, in a way. The Hypothesis confirmed. Okay. You don't always get to see the blow land, do you. This, this is the result, this is the data, no more models, no more predictions, this, this is the data. Seriously, I feel contemplative. 'Cos I recognise that sea. Been dreaming of that sea for years, seeing it as I wake, tasting the salt in my mouth. And this is not the end. You know that. I know that. Might be the end of us, what we do, but who are we? We are the world's sickness, we are an infection, we are a disturbance in the sleep of the world and we're gonna be brushed away, sweated out. The sea rises, the land goes, the cities go, the people are gone. You can't fight that. Right now, I feel alive like I haven't in – decades.

Pause.

Jenny You know what I have started to hate? I have started to hate science. So much .Because I think science is a sort of madness. Science, yes, is human madness. You know I have made an idol of your science.

Pause.

Robin Off you go then.

Jenny I'm going to. Soon.

Pause.

Robin It's just a storm.

Jenny In the end.

Robin It'll make a breach. We'll probably lose the ground floor. We'll lose the fresh water.

Jenny It's just weather.

Robin An extreme weather event.

Jenny Yeah.

Robin I'll move upstairs. There's always been too much room, too much space heated. Too many lights. Move into his room. Did you roll up the carpets?

She nods.

Let the sea claim some, not all .Keep the ash tree. The dead ash tree. Repaint the weather boarding. It was sea before and land before that. When you think in continental time. Geological time. That's the way I'm starting to think we should think.

Jenny *stands in an agony of indecision. 'On the Beach' starts to play.*

Jenny Okay, Rob, okay.

Robin *gets up and holds her; she stays standing, limp.*

Blackout.

The End.