

Many moons ago, I asked my friend Tom Burke (then Director Friends of the Earth) what he really thought would happen if we failed to get to grips with increasing global temperatures. 'Well,' he replied, 'you'd better be prepared to go to Scotland and take a gun.' The image stayed with me – but I didn't know how to write the book he was telling me needed to be written. The subject was too big, too disempowering – people's eyes glazed over when you mentioned it.

Years later, a chance encounter with a real climate-change story (melting ice-graves on the Arctic island of Herschel) gave me a way into the subject and I wrote a play – Island – for the National Theatre, which I later re-wrote as a novel. The book made the Carnegie longlist and was routinely called 'beautiful', 'calm and magical' and 'full of wisdom', but somehow the Arctic setting meant that, for most people, the drama was just too far away – both geographically and emotionally. Not our problem.

Then came the migrant crisis – and the hardening of attitudes and borders. And now the girl with the gun came back to nag me. Might her story intersect with this new anxiety? And why were we so anxious anyway, so lacking in empathy? I began to think it might be because for us in the north (in Europe particularly) the migrant is almost always 'other' – we are not the displaced, the ones forced to travel. So here was my challenge: could I finally bring this story home? Write about a very near future where one of those displaced people could truthfully be you – or me?

Yes, said the girl with the gun.

Nicky Singer

The Survival Game

Nicky Singer

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Man and Boy

I hear them before I see them. Of course. You don't travel ten thousand kilometres without being aware of what's behind you as well as what is ahead.

It's not a large noise. Just the small snap of a twig. Two twigs. And there are lots of twigs here. A thousand twigs, a thousand broken branches, a whole hillside of storm-uprooted trees. And yet I hear those two small snaps. Or rather, I hear the pause that follows them.

The silence of it.

It's the sound of somebody listening to their own footfalls. Their own breathing. Hearing the sudden yelp of air in their chests. I know this, because I too have listened to my own footfalls and held that shout of breath in my chest.

I turn around.

I've learnt this too. It is always better to face whatever it is. Most things can be dealt with. If they can't be dealt with, you can put them in Castle.

There are two of them and they are not soldiers. Not soldiers! Just a man and a boy. Standing quite still. Not trying to hide. Maybe they are too exhausted to hide? I scan them quickly. Life and death these days is often about speed. The boy is young, maybe five years old. I could kill him with my bare hands if necessary, so I turn my attention to the man.

The man is old and thin – though that means nothing, everyone is thin these days. He is dressed in rags. Clothes which, like mine, were probably once brightly coloured but which now have the dirt of travel on them. Travel dirt gets between the fibres of cloth and stays there even if you go to the river to wash. The man and his clothes are now the same colour. The colour of mud.

The man stoops, as if he's carrying an invisible weight on his shoulders. I note his veined hands, his bare legs, his shoeless feet. People who want to live need to take very good care of their shoes. But although the man's head is bowed, his eyes are not. From beneath his mud lids he is looking straight at me.

I take the gun from my belt and point it at him. The gun is a revolver. I got it in the riot at Heathrow DC, five hundred kilometres and twenty-one days ago.

I am much too close to home to be stopped now.

Home.

The gun has no bullets in it. I know this, but the man and the boy do not know this. They would be wise to assume the gun does have bullets. I always assume this about people with guns.

'Halt,' I say.

Halt is a good word. An excellent word. Many more nationalities understand the word 'halt' than understand the word 'stop'. Probably because it's the word the soldiers use. Halt. Halt. Halt. HALT. Put your hands up.

The man halts. He puts his hands up. Or rather he puts just one hand up because his other hand is holding on to the child.

I flick the gun muzzle in the direction of the child. My eyes follow the eye of the gun. I allow myself to look at the boy now. He is also thin and dark, perhaps darker than the man, and his eyes are like cups.

Eyes like cups.

The phrase ambushes me, coming as it does in my father's voice. A phrase from one of the Sudanese folk tales he used to read to me when we lived in Khartoum. In the days before the desert, before the soldiers, before

CASTLE.

Remember, Papa said, whatever happens, the world is beautiful.

Yes, Papa.

This boy is beautiful: his hunger plumped out by the still-soft skin of the very young. His head is almond-shaped and he has a dark rose-petal mouth. There is a smudge of sunlight on his nose. His deep-as-cup eyes give nothing away.

'Let go of the boy,' I say.

The man loosens his grip immediately, puts a second hand in the air. This is good. It means that the man understands English. Things are always trickier if you have to conduct negotiations like these in sign language. It's also good because I'm a girl and some people think they can take advantage of girls.

'Move apart.' I twitch the gun left and right, indicating the space I want to see between them. The man moves a pace or so from the boy but the boy remains where he is. Not moving himself but not seeking to close the gap either. Just as he did not move when I made the old man let go of his hand, did not grab for the man, or cry out or make any sound at all.

'Good,' I say. 'Good.' And then I add: 'Papers.'