

Survivor

Julie Guinand

Novel

French



Survivor is a diary of the end of the world, as experienced from the inside. Between a house too big for her and the natural surroundings of the banks of the Doubs, the diarist gathers, lists and organises the fragments of a world that has passed in order to build a new one, day by day. Post-apocalyptic more in the challenge it throws out to its readers than in its form, Survivor intelligently questions our relationship to solitude, separation and change.

“Now that there is no traffic, now that the birds have stopped singing and my Discman has given up the ghost, I know what silence is. And it isn't as incredible as all that ...”

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Jasmine Liardet

info@dautrepart.ch

Author

Julie Guinand was born in La Chaux-de-Fonds, Switzerland, in 1989. Her collection of short stories, *Dérives asiatiques (Asian Drift)*, appeared in 2016 and *Reportages climatiques (Climate Reportage)*, a collective work to which she contributed, in 2015 (both at Éditions d'autre part). Her short novel *Hors-la-loi (Outlaw)* was published by Paulette Éditrice in 2018. A member of the AJAR collective, Julie Guinand has received several awards for young authors.

Photo: Juliette Félix

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Excerpt translated by Howard Curtis

Day 1

The light suddenly goes out. No fizzing out, no hesitation of any kind, the living room goes from yellow to black. I put my book down and reach out my arm. Instinctively, rather than from any sense of optimism, I press the switch on my bedside lamp, click, click, click. Nothing. The bulb already feels cold beneath my fingertips.

Since we moved to Maison-Monsieur, ten months ago now, there have been four, maybe five blackouts. So they're not really that common. And yet, as I persist with the switch, my heart lurches a few millimetres.

I get up and try the ceiling light. No luck there either. Shit, my book was getting really exciting! I take out my mobile phone, select the "torch" function and head for the front door. Through the big windows, I can see the Doubs gleaming as the clouds part. The restaurant next door to the house is plunged in darkness, which shouldn't bother me, my neighbours have closed the place for two weeks. We had pre-dinner drinks before they left, raised toasts to the Bahamas and the start of spring.

A feeling of cold comes over me.

The fuses are by the front door, in the cubicle that serves as a toilet. The former owner conscientiously wrote down what the large number of circuit breakers correspond to. 1-3: cooking; 4-6: washing machine; 7: heating; 8-9: first floor and attic; 10-11: ground floor lights; 19-24: outside lights. I flick down those for the ground floor, hold my breath, rush to the living room and try the switch. *Niet*. What about the other six lights distributed through the various parts of the house? I run from the cellar to the attic, from the attic to the cellar, my panic growing. My world has just gone over to the dark side and it's too late to call the electrician.

I take out my old diary: I haven't felt such a strong urge to write since I was seventeen.

Then I put on three sweaters, one on top of the other, and burrow under my duvet.

Day 2

I wake up full of energy, press the light switch and observe again what an ineffective gesture that is, but I don't lose heart. It looks like being a long day and I'm not going to let a stupid blackout slow me down. The anxiety I felt last night seems pointless in the light of day.

There's no signal on my mobile. Strange. I go to the landline, pick up the receiver and dial the electrician's number. No tone. I pretend everything's normal and cry out, "Hello, how are things?" then laugh and put the receiver down.

My good mood survives the silence of the coffee machine, the printer, my phone charger. It collapses when I open the fridge: mopping up a centimetre of stagnant water pisses me off.

This general blackout has come at the worst possible moment, I'm supposed to be delivering an important file by the end of the week and I also wanted to book my flight to Japan, answer the twenty-odd e-mails that have piled up, send out invitations for my birthday, call my parents, do my online payments.

I spend the end of the day opening and closing Word files without writing a single line.

Day 3

I resist the temptation to go on the Internet. I have the weird feeling it works better without me, as if it was my fingers, my brain or my negative vibes that screwed up the electrical system and the same thing is likely to happen with the Web.

Is that possible? Has it happened before? There must be a website devoted to phenomena like this and it's a sacrifice not going to check it out.

To be quite honest, I'm mainly scared of disappointment. It's difficult enough conceiving of everyday life without a hot shower, without the *gratin* browning in the oven, without my evening reading session by lamplight or my playlist of French songs. But what about everyday life without Netflix episodes, without Skype, without obsessive checking of the weather forecast, without e-mails from you?

That's how the day passes, my index finger hovering over the mouse.

N.B. I finally crack in the middle of the night: I grope my way down the spiral staircase leading from my bedroom to the living room, switch on the computer and click on the Firefox icon. Hmm, *this website is unavailable*. It makes me weep.