

# Shrinking Sinking Land

*Kelly Cowley*

There were three main ways an umbrella could save your life.

Flea wouldn't have stolen the umbrella from the old woman on the fifth floor where the roof had caved in if she hadn't been sure that it was just what she needed to rescue her mum from the sinkhole that had opened up in their living room.

Her mum had been stuck down in the sinkhole for two days now. Flea couldn't ring up any emergency services to haul her out. If she called for help, whatever help came would quickly suss out that their flat was uninhabitable and send the Wheeler family to the nearest shelter of last resort. When they realized that Flea, her brother Wes, and their mum Shell were squatting in a retirement home and had been doing so ever since the unreported death of dear old Nanna Wheeler last winter, they might just cart her whole family off to the closest detention centre. Flea didn't want to be the one responsible for getting everyone evicted or banged up. So she'd just have to get her mum out of this sinkhole herself.

And for that, Flea needed an umbrella. And not just any old umbrella that the winds could blow inside out and yank from her grasp. Flea had gone through a lot of umbrellas in this summer of superstorms, and most of them had been as cheap and as flimsy as paper cocktail

decorations. But they had been her training umbrellas, not only to preserve her in freak weather conditions, but more importantly, her weapon of choice. Because the first and foremost way that an umbrella could save your life was if you learnt how to use it in combat. Flea had trained herself to be a black belt of the broolly, swordswoman of severe winds. All she had ever needed was an umbrella worthy of her skills.

Now she had one: solid steel tube, fibreglass ribs, high-density waterproof and slash resistant canopy—an Excalibur of umbrellas. Flea couldn't resist wielding and thrusting it as she bounded down the stairs to the lower levels of the tower block. If she sharpened up its tip, it'd be good for inflicting shallow stab wounds too. Its crook handle was the perfect size and shape to put a human throat in a choke hold. Its pole was strong enough to use as a battering ram and sturdy enough to clothesline any cops that might get in her way. With this umbrella, Flea didn't need anyone else to protect her. She'd learned from experience that the best way for a young Scouse girl to survive on the dark rainy streets of Manchester was to become the person who you wouldn't want to meet on the dark rainy streets of Manchester. That was who Flea could be now. She had her umbrella and she wasn't afraid to use it.

Flea reached the ground floor of their sink estate, splashing down in a stream of floodwater that rose to her knees. A shallow day for this side of town. In her shell suit and wellies, Flea barely felt the chill anymore. She'd steeled herself against the smell, too. She was used to keeping her footing and not slowing her pace, even with the city swamps sloshing around her ankles. You could never tell when someone might jump you from behind in old Mankland. She was always up for a scrap—either with a mugger or a gale force wind—but Flea was smart enough to know that legging it away was still always the safest option. Whether in fight or flight mode, she never let her guard down.

Two paces from her door, Flea felt a *whack* in the small of her back.

Tightening her grip on the umbrella handle, she spun round to face her attacker. But nobody was there. It was like she had been pounced on by thin air. Then she felt tiny claws clambering up the back of her shell suit. She felt a furry tail tickling her neck and a familiar fat squirrel slipping into the folds of her hood for warmth. Flea sagged with relief and didn't bother to dislodge it. The flats of Moss Side were rife with pests – mutant rats swimming the streams of the lower floors and the obese pigeons bobbing on the water like feral ducks. Flea didn't mind the animals though. She'd learnt to live with them.

Flea had learned to live with a lot of things since the superstorms had first brought her family to this city two years ago. Since the Mersey floodwaters of her poor drowned Liverpool had forced them this way up the Union Canal. The Wheeler family were city folk, born and bred. They couldn't imagine themselves eking out a wetland life in the kitchen sink country of Cheshire, Lancashire, or the Wirral. They needed to feel proper concrete through the puddles. So they'd come to find their own dirty lungful of breathing space in the already bloated population of Manchester. *Any port in a storm*, as her Nanna used to say, and even the hardest bastard you know couldn't argue with the storms these days.

Flea climbed over the sandbags piled up to their letterbox and pressed her shoulder to the door of the flat. As she tumbled through its gape, one of her boots squelched down on the saturated remains of their carpet. Her other leg slipped out from under her and dangled briefly over a chilly abyss. Flea scrambled back on her haunches, panting as she slumped against the wall. The sinkhole had gotten bigger while she'd been out.

“Is that you up there, Fleabag?” called a voice from below.

Her mother's voice. Flea rolled her eyes. Why had her mum ever gone to the trouble of giving her such a prissy name as "Felicity" if she was only going to insist on shortening it to the ugliest little nicknames that she could think up?

"Yeah, it's me, Shell. I almost fell in your cesspit."

Flea never called her mother "mum" anymore either. Not out loud at least. Shell was more like a sibling than a parent to her. A bad influence of a big sister at that. Shelly would only moan if Flea or Wes used the M word, complaining that they were making her feel old. In spite of her two strapping teenage kids, Shell was barely into her thirties. Whatever Shell was to them, she was still family and she was stuck down in a hole all alone. A lonely little spider of a woman flushed down the earth's toilet bowl.

"So...are you about ready to be rescued then?" Flea asked her mum, trying to sound casual. Breezy even, like her mum wasn't trapped twenty feet deep in the yawning crater that had become the centrepiece of their tiny bedsit flat. She asked as casually as you might ask about the weather. And like the weather, Flea feared the forecast.

No answer came at first. She crawled to the sinkhole's brim, pulled a torch from her rucksack, and pointed its dull glow into the chasm. The hole in the floor was roughly as wide as a kid's paddling pool. About halfway down, the sinkhole bottlenecked then stretched into a large cavern, an airy pocket in the earth half-filled with the deluge that had drained from off their kitchen and living room floor. Floating on the waters of this subterranean swamp, there was a small red dinghy. Shell had made her bed in the dinghy long ago, bundling herself up in her dressing gown, plastic bags over her slippers and her hands gloved with Marigolds. Flea hadn't been at home when the floor had collapsed in the

flat and the dinghy had been sucked into the pooling pit below. Shelly claimed that she'd suffered no injuries, but since she'd probably been drunk at the time of her fall, she wasn't the best judge of her own health. Her mum could be a mess of breaks and bumps down there.

"Shell, did you hear me?" asked Flea, knowing her mum had bloody well heard and was stalling her answer, thinking up a new excuse not to move. "Let's get moving! Before the toxic waste buried down there brings you out in scales."

In the torchlight, she saw Shell's hand jerk up reflexively to her neck. Her eczema couldn't be doing well in that hole. It looked like her dirty blonde hair was slowly turning to seaweed. Flea didn't really know if there was anything poisonous down in the soil, but she hoped her suggestion would have Shell itching for escape.

"Put the kettle on first, will you, pet?" Shell called up, breaking her long wince of a silence. "Fire up the camping stove and make us a brew. You've been out for ages and your brother's still off looting with the lads. I've been gagging for a cup of tea. Where have you been, kidda? You left me here on my billy lonesome."

Shelly would have used these same bored impatient tones if Flea or her brother Wes had been too slow in bringing a takeaway home from the chippy. It was hard to play the hero to somebody who was so disinterested in their own rescue.

"Bugger your cup of tea!" snapped Flea. "If we get you out of this hole, then we'll celebrate with my last two cans of Coke. How about that?"

This wasn't a casual bribe. Flea had been hoarding her Cokes since she'd stolen them from a toppled vending machine during the spate of riots

and looting that had broken out on the city streets at the fag end of the summer. It was late October now and Flea had kept those Cokes like two dented rubies at the bottom of her rucksack. She'd been saying that she would only crack their ring pulls at the end of the world. The truth was she would settle for sharing them with Shelly if she'd only get her arse out of this hole.

"Maybe later, kidda," said Shell. "I've got a headache coming on. There's pains in all me joints. You know what that means. There's a storm coming."

"There's always a bloody storm coming! You've been spending too much time with the senile old biddies on this block if you reckon your body's somehow tuned into the weather. Enough of this old wives' bollocks. Let's be having you!"

Flea gave up waiting for Shell's cooperation. She turned off the torch and fixed her eyes on the bucket dangling from a rope over the sinkhole's mouth. This rope, attached to the bucket's handle, was looped round the longest branch of the tree that was sticking through the smashed glass of their kitchen window. It was weeks ago now that this tree had been blown through their window. None of the Wheelers knew exactly where the tree had come from or how far it had travelled on hurricane winds. The retirement flats were miles from the nearest park. The skinny trunk stretching over their bedsit was just another thing that they'd learned to live with. They could hang their washing up to dry on it. They could sharpen knives on its bark. And with the sinkhole directly under its branches, the tree had most recently enabled them to rig up a pulley system to deliver food and fags down to their mum in the basin below. Flea got to her feet, extending her umbrella to hook the rope with its crook handle. With the sinkhole widening, the bucket was now much harder to reach.

“Fleabag, what are you playing at?”

“I told you!” Flea yelled back. “I’m rescuing you! Do you know there are three main ways that an umbrella can save your life? One of those ways is using it as a raft. Remember that final evacuation day in Liverpool when families were putting their toddlers and pets in their upended brollies? Like little lifeboats on the floodwaters? That’s just how umbrellas are made these days. A special kind of rubber or something, so that they float and don’t leak. Get your skinny arse into this one and I’ll hoist you out of there. You won’t have to stand up or even bend your knees. So don’t start whining again about getting head rushes or twinges in your spine. Just shift your backside into the broolly. I’ll do the rest.”

Flea was so sure about this umbrella being the solution that she was sounding like an advert. Her voice had gone all sunshiny like one of those airhead presenters on the shopping channel that Shelly used to watch all day long before they had lost power for the last time, back when the telly had still been there to hold the Wheeler family together. Now Flea was left clinging to a ragged piece of rope, retying it to the umbrella’s handle and swinging it over the sinkhole, hoping that she could use it to fish her mother out of the pool below. Hoping that the rope and its spokes would hold her mother’s weight. Shell was such a skinny little thing that, at just sixteen, Flea was already taller and tougher.

*When did I get bigger than my mum? Flea thought as she lowered the umbrella. When did I get strong enough to lift her up? When did Shelly start to shrink?*

The voice out of the hole interrupted her thoughts.

“You know, it’s bad luck to open an umbrella indoors.”

“Oh, give it a rest, will you!” blasted Flea, cutting her off. “I’ve had enough of your superstitious hocus pocus excuses. You’re not a weather witch! You’re just a silly mare that’s stuck down at the bottom of a hole. Now get in the brolly!”

Flea gave the rope a little shake for emphasis, like she was whipping a horse’s reigns. Her mum huffed and sighed a moment longer. Then Flea slowly felt the rope pinch as a hand caught hold of the umbrella’s canopy at the end of the line.

*She’s gonna do it, thought Flea. She’s going to let me save her.*

Then there came the sound of Shell screeching at the top of her lungs.

“There’s something inside!” she cried. “Something *alive!*”

Flea frowned, confused for a second. Then she reached over her shoulder and patted the back of her shell suit. Her hood had been emptied of its furry hitchhiker.

“It’s just a squirrel, Shell!” Flea called. “Sorry about that. The bloody creature’s been stalking me, stowing away in my hood. I can’t get rid of it.”

Shell gave a spluttering laugh that echoed all the way up the sinkhole. “Animals have always liked you, Flea,” she said. “Animals know you’re soft.”

“I am not! I’ve just not been hungry enough to cook it yet.”

Shell laughed again. “You’re a soft lass and those little vermin know it. They know you’re lucky. That you’ll survive. I named you after luck, didn’t I, Felicity? I’m not as lucky as you are, kid. That squirrel will give me rabies if I go anywhere near it.”



Flea closed her eyes. “Don’t give up, Shell. Not now. *Please.*”

“Where did you say you got this umbrella anyway?” Shell asked, changing the subject. “And don’t lie to me and say that you robbed it from an outdoors store. Your brother tells me that all the big shops were picked clean months ago.”

Flea winced. She would have felt a whole lot better if she had nicked the umbrella from one of the big chain stores. But after all the shopping precincts had been stormed in the summer riots and after the clean-up cops had been brought in to arrest the looters, those big brand shops had been left derelict, their billboard signs disappearing behind barriers of rivet metal and their consumer goodies all harvested away. During these last few weeks, Flea had been reduced to scavenging from charity shops and food banks for the last slim pickings of supplies. Everyone needed to gather up supplies.

Like every other bugger around here, Flea was getting ready. This week the city of Manchester, just like the rest of their sorry country and just like the whole bleeding world, was being closed for maintenance. It was shutting up shop. It was holing itself up for the long winter. It was going to ground. There was only one working week left now until the Global Mandatory Hibernation. The big G.M.H. that’d been looming Flea’s entire life, that had been voted for a generation ago, before she was even born. This Friday it would finally arrive. This was the last week of the world as Flea knew it.

“Where did you get the broly, girl?” Shell persisted.

“I took it from the old lady on the fifth floor where the roof’s caved in,” she admitted. “Rain was still leaking in through her busted ceiling panels and she was just sitting there in her chair, still as a statue, stiff as a board.

She was sat waiting to die with her broolly in her hand. It didn't look like she'd even tried to call for help."

"She didn't want to leave," said Shell. "The old folks in these flats won't ever step out into the weather again. They'd rather be left to drown in the comfort of their own homes."

Flea swallowed. "And you feel the same?"

It was crazy for Shelly to want to stay. She wasn't old and this wasn't their home. But Flea could still remember the depression that had hung over her mother like a black cloud after they were forced out of their old flat in Liverpool. Shell had loved that flat, even though it used to take in a good three feet of sewer water during every superstorm. The family flood drill was always the same. Flea and Wes would climb on the top bunk where they would fight over the blankets, nose-plugs, and snacks until the pump man came. Their mum would make her own hard bed on the kitchen table, which was fair enough since nobody ever ate off it. It was only after the Wheelers lost their old home that Shell started washing her headache pills down with cheap gin, which had sunk her faster than any flood.

"I could just hibernate here," said Shell, sounding scarily like she meant it. "I can't go through another evacuation, our Flea. There's nowhere left to go. Not for the likes of us. We can't afford our own fancy backyard bunker. Your old Nanna was the only relative we had to shelter with. She might have lived longer if we hadn't brought all of our dirt and germs to her doorstep. Where can we go now? There's no shelter left in this country. Little England is shrinking. The tide's creeping in every day. The ground water's surging up from below. This country's just a lifeboat now. They'll chuck anyone overboard who they don't need. They'll

deport them like your dad or they'll let the weather do the job for them. I...I *like* it down here, Flea. It's quiet. I can't hear the thunder or the wind rattling the walls. It's like going back into the womb. Like being all safe inside your mum's tum."

Flea shuddered. Shell talking about the womb only brought out her claustrophobia.

"Just get in that bleeding umbrella!" Flea fumed. "If you won't, then I'm climbing down there to drag you out of that hole by your hair. You hear me?!"

Flea meant what she said. She made a leap for the rope, catching it between her palms. The tree creaked as it took her weight, but she wasn't heavy enough to break it. She coiled her arms and legs around the rope cord, feeling herself slowly slipping down its length. She peered down into the sinkhole's shadows, feeling its mouth gaping to swallow her whole. But before she could get any deeper, she thrust out her legs to brace herself against its brim. She clasped onto the ledge, clawing her way back onto the living room floor.

Down below, her mum could only laugh at her failed heroics.

"I keep telling ya. You can't cope with tight spaces, girl. You think I can't remember from when you were little? How you used to scream and bawl if I took you onto the subway. All those games of hide and seek that ended in trauma. And now the hibernation's coming. And you don't want to go to ground, do you? Oh, my poor little Fleabag. My poor luckless Felicity." The rope jostled, pushed by a hand from below. "Take your broly back, kidda. Don't pretend that you didn't grave rob it for yourself."

Flea wanted to tell her mum to shut it. She wanted to say how the retirement flats had already been ransacked – the medical cabinets all emptied, the batteries pinched out of every appliance. Flea had only been looting the leftovers. She wanted to say that when she'd pulled the umbrella from that old lady's claw, she didn't feel bad for stealing her last possession, the last thing she had likely blown all her pension on. The young didn't pity the old anymore and the old didn't envy those who were stuck being young now. Better that they'd been young when the sun was still shining and the streets were still dry.

Shelly wasn't old but she'd lived long enough to remember the sunshine. Long enough to miss it like hell and lose hope that it was ever coming back.

“Take your umbrella and get out of here, Flea,” her mum said, her tone softer now. “There's no sense in us both going down with this sinking ship.”

Flea's throat constricted. She couldn't answer, she could hardly breathe. She simply took hold of the rope again and slowly pulled the umbrella back to the surface. The squirrel hopped into the branches of the dead tree and then tightrope-walked down to Flea, crawling up her arm and back into the warmth of her hood. When she untied the broolly, Flea found that her mum had filled up its canopy with the litter out of her dinghy. With chocolate wrappers, cigarette packs, and drained bottles of booze. Wes and his looter friends must have visited the flat, feeding their mum like a baby bird, a junk feast of sugar, nicotine, and gin. He'd probably made her a cup of tea too. Flea wondered why Wes hadn't climbed down the sinkhole to pull Shell out himself. The answer came to her too quickly, like a sour taste to her mouth. Wes hadn't helped their mum because he knew she'd only slow him down.

In numb movements, Flea slipped the rucksack from her shoulders, reached inside, and pulled out one of her last cans of Coke. It was warm in her palm but she thought the ground water might cool it. She placed the Coke into the bucket then wordlessly lowered it down into the hole, like a coin flicked into a wishing well or an offering to a shrine. Flea felt the bucket land softly on the dingy below and a few seconds later she heard the squirt and the fizz of its ring pull. Her mum must be very thirsty down there. How long before dehydration took hold? How long did she have to think up another rescue plan?

Flea didn't say goodbye. She didn't say, "See ya, Shell!" and she certainly didn't say, "I'll be back soon, mum." She wouldn't tell her mother that the next person she saw would probably be some cop who'd be wrenching her out of her peaceful little womb tomb by force. Flea simply snatched up her rucksack and climbed back over the sandbags at their door. Out in the hall, she waded downstream towards the entrance doors to the tower block. She peered through the smashed glass, staring at the storm still raging outside.

There were three main ways an umbrella could save your life.

For Flea, the surest of these was using her umbrella as a shield. Not to protect her from the clouds above. Flea wasn't so stupid that she would actually hold an umbrella up over her head. Not unless she wanted to be yanked off her feet into a cyclone. She'd learned never to rest her broolly on her shoulder either. It wasn't a bloody parasol and the world was no longer made for picnics. Flea knew that if she chose to stay above ground and live in the weather, she'd need to thrust her umbrella straight out ahead of her. Somebody still had to fend for her family. One of them still needed to brave the outside.

Flea kicked the doors to their flats and they flew wide. She  
breathed in the rain, she opened her broolly to the winds and  
she damn well braced herself.

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