



Overhead the heron beats in; the full stretch of his wings rakes the air. His skinny legs dangle over the pond, which is too clogged with algae to offer up anything but a place to go. Then he drops into his vigil at the water's edge. He folds his snake-neck into its watchful grey hunch and I move on.

There's a bucket, blown on a gale and snagged by a tree. Pale blue like a patch of old sky that forgot to turn grey, it swings above me, its handle looped over a high branch. I am waiting for the rain-filled weight of it to slide it to the end of the branch and bring it crashing down. Then it's mine; I'm the only one who knows about it and have it earmarked for a special purpose. But I can't stay now; there are other things to do.

So as usual I leave the park by the gate at the derelict lodge, whose crossbars are slippery from the non-stop drizzle, and as usual I hook my umbrella on the top bar and clamber over into the road; the mossy wood bends under my weight and one day will collapse, but today it holds. The wall on either side of the gate is demolished and the deer come and go as they please in search of food and shelter, but I'm a stickler; this is how I do things. It's a calm day so I'll take the short cut through the wood, which gets me from here, the park, to there, the market, without being seen. The other days, when it means taking the road, I don't go, because I don't like to be seen. Only one person ever sees me, and it is him I am going to now.

My path, which follows the perimeter of the old golf course, is a fissure visible only to me, which weaves through the shoulder-high ferns like a wonky parting in a thick head of hair.

When we first came here, the golf course was a progression of green velvet swirls; later it became the makeshift burial ground for the first wave of victims. And when the epidemic and killing had spread so there was no more room underground, or else the earth had baked too hard to dig, I forget which, Jason and his cronies

built massive pyres on it, which sent thick foul-smelling clouds drifting over the mill, coating our roof with their pestilent ash. I took no interest in those matters then, and I have no inclination to reflect on such sinister times now, other than by way of explanation.

So I push forward, and the broad filigree of leaves flicks spray into my eyes. I raise an arm high above my head like a drowning refugee, while my umbrella guides me on through the mud and stones and tree roots that lie in wait to trip me. A raindrop dives from a branch, dodges my hard hat, plops against the back of my neck and sneaks a course between my shoulder blades. My boots, heavy with mud, emit a happy fartsound with each lift of the foot. Any evidence of their fabric and original colour disappeared long ago under coatings of slime. A fern sprig pokes from the buttonhole of my jacket like a marsupial youngster in its mother's pouch.

When I reach the lane that leads to the ruined clubhouse, I ignore it and walk in the opposite direction, towards the road. Up ahead, a pondish pothole spills over the width of the track and into the woods on either side, too large to jump across and, I test it with my umbrella, too deep to wade through. A bent umbrella is no use to anyone, but today is a day for taking a risk so I see no harm in using mine as a pole to swing myself over. As I jump mucky water splatters my calves. I point the umbrella towards the road to check it for damage, but it remains straight as the road itself, which is admittedly slightly bent. I have become distracted from my mission. Like any human with a purpose, I am prone to diversion; it is one of my worst habits.

I pick up the pace when I meet the road's final sweep into town, but am slowed right down again at the sight of a reddish dollop in the middle of the road ahead. There's a game I like to play which involves trying to pinpoint the precise distance at which my eyesight deteriorates. In this life, games have to be unwinnable or you have to keep thinking of new ones.

Right now my focus is sharp; the mound ahead is clearly an animal of some kind. A fox or a dog. Probably asleep. I take a step forward. Its outline is still sharp. Another. Sharp. Another. I'm now three steps away, and the shape has blurred at the edges, softened. The change occurred during my last move, but when I take a step

backwards again in the slowest possible wobbling motion the precise moment of transition eludes me. It's like trying to watch a flower open.

By its tail I can tell it's a fox. Was a fox. Its head has been flattened, squashed into the pitted road. The umbrella spike prods at its body. Was it you who stole my chicken? Its belly is soft, but more from being sodden than newly dead. I look up and around, but all is quiet, just the creak of the trees and the tiny clicks of twigs hitting the road. I sigh and move on, aiming great heavy swipes at the twig litter with my boots, all the way to the shopping precinct.

No one cared when the storms destroyed the shop fronts, they were already past their best, and in its dereliction, the precinct's face is somehow more honest, more suited to the shoddiness of its original, mindless consumerist purpose, as Jason would say. One time, someone made a pathetic attempt at patching it all up, nailed up planks that doubled as information boards to carry notices about the state of things within: DO NOT ENTER! ROOF FALLEN IN! SAFETY HERE! And other more head-twisting messages like: KILL THE PAGAN HAG! But some things just aren't worth saving and they soon gave up.

Before Noah set up the market, itinerants would occasionally occupy one of the safer shops to trade off the accumulations of their travels: home-grown food; hand-made, looted or second-hand clothing; books, candles, tools, herbs and medicines. They would stay long enough for people to get wind of them, exchange what they could, then move on, leaving nothing behind but their stories, which even now circulate the communities in Chinese whispers. Or so Noah tells me.

Now that Noah is the linchpin of the trading community, those same Travellers or their descendants, the temporary dwellers of abandoned vehicles and derelict buildings, bring their scavenged goods to him and exchange them for whatever they need: food, drinking water, clothing. He calls them Jobbers. Without Jobbers, the settled communities in this district would fail.

I duck into my favourite doorway, which I use as a lookout to check the coast is clear before going down to the market. Today of all days it is important I have Noah to myself because what I am about to do is something I once would have considered rash.

An intense, yellow, off-kilter stare from the opposite doorway jolts me back into the present. I step forward, whooshing air through my front teeth, and stretch out a hand to attract the attention of the mange-ridden but still charismatic ginger cat. But he fancies himself as a sphinx too disgusted with humanity to even acknowledge my existence.

I straighten up and disguise my intimidation by fumbling in my jacket pocket for the scrap of paper I put there; unfold it to check its eight-number inscription is still legible: 68.36.21.51. Rachel. I refold it and pin it to my palm with my fingernails.

Reassured now that Noah is alone, I step out into the precinct. Hel-lo. One syllable per footstep, I rehearse my grand entrance. Two steps away from the door I notice the handle has blurred, but there is no time now for games. I take a deep breath, lean my shoulder against the cold metal door and push myself in, to inside where everything is always the same.

Rough wooden crates huddle the central floor space, some empty and others harbouring the small hard apples or potatoes that are barely distinguishable from one another thanks to their green skins. The combined stink of goat's cheese and damp-brick mustiness hangs in the air and tickles the back of my throat. I clamp a hand over my nose and mouth but too late to stop the volley of sneezes that erupts against my fingers, announcing my arrival before I am ready. Four for a boy. He sees me first. The only man I know inside a five-mile radius.

– Hello Rachel, he says. Not seen you for a while.

Face burning, I wipe my mucous palm against my hip. My over-rehearsed first word sticks in the back of my throat and he beats me to it.

– I hope you've not been sick? He looms towards me then veers off behind the counter. My head shakes from side to side.

– Have you any cheese? I say, staring at the pungent wheel of rubbery stuff on the counter. Only bullies and manipulators ask rhetorical questions, Jason would say.

– Only the goat's, but I can let you have four ounces. He folds his apron into a pleat and wipes his knife in it. What else do you need? I think you've still got credit for that last batch of eggs you brought in.

He looks much younger today than the last time I saw him. But

he must be thirty and some men are men by thirty. My courage is on the wane, and perhaps I won't do it today after all; perhaps I should wait to meet someone closer to my own age. And what are the chances of that happening, says the voice in my head. The voice in my head is Stephanie's, but more about her later, because now I am staring at the matted black lengths of Noah's hair, thick and strong, and imagining them, safe as rope, in my hand.

– You just missed a couple of *them*, he says. Unless you saw them?

Poor Noah, he does his best to interest me in the communities, probably thinks I should live in one. And I do my best to avoid any discussion on the subject, but as usual he interprets my silence as encouragement to launch into his latest story. Noah is never short of stories, gleaned from whoever is passing through, stories about people I have never met and never want to meet. But today of all days I must not give him any cause to picture me in a bad light, so I allow a flicker of interest to show in my face.

He pauses for effect before he comes out with it.

– I know what they get up to up there, he says.

I carry on sifting lentils through my fingers, picking out the tiny stones and throwing them to the ground.

– They make babies.

My hand stops.

– Momma has them all brainwashed into believing their heavenly mission on earth is to provide beautiful beings for the New Dawn Coming, whatever that might be. And, he lowers his voice for this bit, they keep their men locked up, to conserve their energy for the Impregnation Ceremonies. He divides those last two words into eight syllables, widening his eyes to add more emphasis, then punctuates them by squeezing one eyelid into an exaggerated wink.

– You'd better watch out, he says. Apparently they're always on the lookout for new blood.

It's a good story, but take I it all with a pinch of salt, not just because it doesn't tally with Jason's grand declarations on the perils of breeding, but also because I've heard these tales before, and no doubt the next will contradict this one. For my own part, I have never seen any men even near the New Dawn house, nor have I seen any children, nor one pregnant woman. But then I avoid the

place like the plague. The only evidence of creative activity is the scented candles and uneven pots they bring to the market.

It's time to turn the conversation round to the real reason for my visit, and with the air so full of talk of procreation my question may seem spontaneous; I am under no illusion that he will take me seriously, but I have to try.

– I was wondering, I say.

Wondering. The words are out there and I want them back. I should wait and find out more about him before I do something so stupid. But Stephanie would keep going, and so I do too.

– I was wondering if you would like to meet up.

It takes him a few moments to realise my mumbling is unrelated to the story he's just told. I plunge my hand deeper into the lentils.

– What, for a singsong or something? Do you have a phone number?

I hold out the damp square of paper, pockmarked with half-moons of fingernail pressure, their shadow embossed on my palm. He takes it and unfolds it without looking.

– Grand, I'll give you a call, he says. As if it was his idea all along. Have you been busy painting? He cuts a rough triangle in the cheese slab.

– Yes. Quite a bit, I say. Lying.

– Will that do you?

He slaps the paper-wrapped lump onto the counter and leans his face towards mine. Black lashes brush the top of his firm golden cheek as he throws me a soft wink. I jerk my head back thinking he is about to kiss me. Embarrassed by my mistake, I stretch my mouth into a too-wide grin.

– I think it might be a bit over the four, he says with a shrug. I never get it dead on. A second wink implies I hold privileged status when it comes to the measuring out of cheese, which is a start I suppose.

– Anything else?

I love the flat *a* of his *annie*-thing.

– Got some nice potatoes in yesterday. Or there's russets?

– Oh, no, I've plenty, thanks. I'll have to get going to beat the weather.

Outside, the drizzle I was too preoccupied to notice on the way in has evolved into a stinging rain and is blowing in horizontal gusts like swarms of pine needles.

Despite it all the cross-eyed ginger continues to stare into the indeterminate future. I rummage in my bag and pull out a small piece of squashed cheese. Here you are puss. I want him to like me. I want to be one of those people who have a way with animals. And I want Noah to see me being kind, passing the bit over the four on to a creature more needy than myself. I extend the morsel in his direction and then, when he refuses to take it, toss it at him through the rain. Suit yourself, I whisper, in case Noah's listening. The cheese lands in a puddle close to his front paws. Craning his neck forward, as if the rest of his body has been stuffed and cannot move, he mashes the titbit between rotting teeth, nibbling slow and reluctant, as if his only reason for eating is a fear of seeming impolite.

I push out my bottom lip and blow hard to disperse the streams of rain that slide down my nose. I suspect that Noah misunderstood my proposition. I doubt he'll call. But who cares; at least I have something new to tell Stephanie.

The light is almost gone although it must still be morning. Willing the storm to hold off long enough for me to get home, I pull my hood over my hard hat to shield my ears from the sting of the wind. The rain drums against the umbrella's taut skin and the wind pushes up into its bell, threatening to wrestle it from my two-handed grip. Now it would be too dangerous to take the short cut, I have no choice but to stay on the road and follow it past the House of the New Dawn. Its west-facing windows are bricked up against the weather and all its inhabitants should be safe indoors, so it ought to be easy for me to pass by unseen.

Jason used to work in this house when it was the Vegetarian Society offices, so it was his idea to break in and open it up for the group of refugees whose New York to Paris flight, which turned out to be the last ever plane to land at Ringway in one piece, had been forced into an emergency landing by Hurricane Gilda. Nature's refugees. The sickest passengers from that flight were dumped in the airport hotels, which were already overcrowded but

because of their isolation were considered the best place to leave the disease-ridden and dying. So there they were left, with no one to nurse or feed them. Later, when things had calmed down a bit, Jason and his gang set the whole lot on fire.

The healthier passengers divided into two groups. Most chose to continue their journey south on foot, in the hope of finding their way across the Channel, and most of them will have perished en route from starvation or the lack of fresh water. In any case, none of them will have made it beyond the *Wide wide river, As wide as the Channel itself, That once was our great capital*. The rest, Momma among them, were marched up the motorway by Jason, and introduced to this cold and crumbling building and the start of a new life, which they have dedicated to the preparation for something that will probably never happen. And now these memories have triggered my curiosity, which in turn has undermined my sense of urgency to get home. I decide to sneak in for a closer look. If I'm discovered I'll say I'm unwell and sheltering from the weather. Or I'll run away.

This porch was not built to harbour malingerers; the sheets of corrugated iron that cover its rickety frame rattle in the wind and threaten a rusty decapitation. I examine the huge front door; its paintwork is scratched and peeled by hostile weather to reveal the pale oak beneath. Off to one side a wooden plaque announces THE HOUSE OF THE NEW DAWN, in tame rainbow colours. The boards under my feet creak with every move. It's knock or run. Or both. But I'm not yet ready for that level of spontaneity, so I run.

I can imagine nothing worse than living in a community. Nothing and no one could persuade me to leave my island. Not even Noah. In the past, evangelical scaremongers and would-be leaders, I mean Jason and his friends, would pressure isolated individuals to *Join Forces & Share Resources*, and after Jason left I expected his abandoned disciples to target me, but thankfully they left me alone. Sometimes I wonder if anyone besides Noah and Stephanie even knows I exist.

Now the poor old trees are my only guardians and as I make my way home they shake their gnarled fingers over my head like fussy grandparents, reprimanding me for my wayward behaviour.

It's Stephanie's fault, I say. We were playing our favourite game of raising the stakes and she made me do it. As if our friendship isn't restricted enough by the distances between us and our connecting satellite, we, or rather she, enjoys putting as much strain on those triangular boundaries as they will take. I just go along with it.

– Come on honey, she had said in this particular round. You *know* what you need.

It would have been foolish to let on so early in the game that I did know, so I let her spell it out for me.

– A replacement, she said. A lover? And her voice slithered over that last word, which of course wasn't to be anything like her last word, dragged its last syllable into an upward inflexion. As if I had difficulty in comprehending.

And maybe I did.

– Honey, you're at your sexual peak. Men can smell it, you know. Smell those little menopause-baby butts. But only if you let them within a five-mile radius.

I giggled like a girl and, clenching the telephone handset to my ear with the aid of a hunched shoulder, shuffled into the bathroom to inspect the fuzzy close-up of myself in the mirror. I have no idea how I look any more; the wall behind me prevents me from putting enough of a distance between the mirror and myself to afford a clear view. I swear I'm going blind.

– But Steph, I have no idea if there even *are* any men within a five-mile radius.

– My point exactly, honey.

– I don't know. I've got my painting. I'm happy enough.

I haven't so much as lifted a paintbrush since I used up the last of the paints Jason left but she doesn't need to know that; add it to the list of things we don't mention.

– Oh stop right there.

Stephanie's patience fizzled out even more quickly than usual, and the thought that she might not be falling for it flashed through my mind.

– How many pictures of her own vagina does a girl need? she said. Then her voice cracked into a violent cough. Stephanie is sick, but we never discuss it. Her next sentence was delivered on one

husky breath, in the brief respite between coughs.

– Now get out there and find yourself a gorgeous young thing with overwhelming Oedipal tendencies and, she added those fatal words, don't dare call me again until you have.

I was dismissed. For our friendship to be threatened by so trivial a matter excites us both, not least because other, more powerful forces can snatch that choice from us, in a one false move and the satellite gets it kind of way.

Nearly home, and the path from the park to the mill is flooding; the fields on either side are already shallow salinas. I jump down from the stile onto both feet and splash black water over my knees, then run the full length of the path screeching for joy as each stamping foot shoots rainwater back up towards the sky.

The escalated pitch of the wind has brought the turbine to a standstill. The house is dark but warm. I throw off my soaked jacket and drop it with my boots at the bottom of the stairs, and run up to the kitchen to rub dry my legs with a towel made warm by the stove.

By the time I have found the telephone and dialled Stephanie's number it is too late; the line is out.

The cuffs of my sleeves are wet and scratch at my wrists so I roll them up off my skin while I rinse a potato under the tap, give it a good stabbing with a fork and place it in the stove to bake. Then I dangle a New Dawn spill in the flames and use it to light the New Dawn candles in the living room.

My body is a dead weight, my mind a bag of feathers as I throw myself onto the collapsing sofa, which collapses a bit more with the weight of me, then roll myself up in the heaps of blankets and sheets. As the candles burn themselves out, fleeting half-thoughts keep me from sleeping, of Noah, of the squinty red cat, and of the dead fox that I now realise had disappeared on my return. I sleep for two days. I dream of foxes.