Running Coyote and Fallen Star

and other stories

Gavin Boyter

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For my friends

(my most demanding readers)

Stuff your eyes with wonder, live as if you'd drop dead in ten seconds. See the world. It's more fantastic than any dream made or paid for in factories.

Ray Bradbury

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Introduction

In February 2020, with remarkable timing, I quit my administrative position in the NHS to seek other opportunities. In part, I found myself in a management position entirely unsuited to my temperament. I was also growing to realise that it was absurd to be working in a job that didn't use any of my skills. I thought it might not be unreasonable to find a job where I might capitalize on my writing abilities.

Of course, we all know what happened next – Covid-19 appeared, a malignant viral invader, seemingly intent on throwing the planet into chaos.

I'd planned to spend a few weeks at my parents' house in Edinburgh, my hometown. First, I thought I'd have a week or two in the West Highlands, revisiting some places I'd not seen since my childhood. This notably included Sandaig, the beach near Glenelg where writer and naturalist Gavin Maxwell once lived (after whom I was named).

I loaded up Roxy, my self-converted Mazda Bongo campervan and set off. The first few days were quite lovely. I relished driving through snowclad mountains at Glencoe and parking on the top of the steeply winding Mam Ratigan, while wild winds buffeted the van and pale winter sunshine contrasted with fast-moving banks of cloud. At night, the sparkling skein of the Milky Way was alarmingly vivid, in a way you never experience in London.

Then one morning I picked my way along the rocky foreshore to Glenelg, blasted by furious horizontal rain and increasingly angry wind, finally appreciating how challenging it must have been for Maxwell to build a home there. After a couple of days of brutal weather, I decided to cut short my Highland idyll and head to Edinburgh.

Once I got to the capital, Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, reacting quicker than her English counterpart to the spreading pandemic, announced a stay-at-home lockdown. Overnight I found that my voluntary trip to visit my parents, Ian and Kath, had become a sort of house arrest.

I'm exaggerating of course. It was in fact lovely to catch up with my folks and my sisters (socially distanced, outdoors, and often through a fence) but it also felt weirdly lonely and regressive – like I'd stepped back into childhood at the age of 49.

I needed a purpose. I couldn't really look for work down south when everyone was being furloughed and encouraged to work from home. I had sufficient savings to get by for a few months and no real inclination to apply for jobs I didn't really want out of a sense of obligation.

I decided to write. I had a novel to work on (*Stutter*, still unfinished) and I also thought I might start writing short stories again. As a teenager and young man, I used to love making these brief forays into imaginative worlds, often in the genres of science fiction or the surreal. Somewhere along the line, I lost the habit and I'd been told by more than one contemporary that this was a great shame. Spending time in the family home might allow me to tap back into that youthful wellspring of imagination. There was just one problem. I had no ideas for stories.

From out of nowhere appeared the thought that perhaps I could use some random process to generate stories. I had some precedent for this. In recent months I'd entered the NY Midnight short story competition (in fact, A Sign from Above, featured here, was originally written for it). The premise of this contest is to use randomness to inspire creativity. The organisers randomly assign a location, object, and genre, all of which you must incorporate in your tale.

I'd always found such challenges entertaining and inspiring. I'm also a big fan of the OuLiPo writers of the 1960s, including George Perec, who famously wrote an entire book without including the letter "e" (brilliantly translated into English by Gilbert Adair as *A Void*). The OuLiPo movement, which began in France,

used deliberatively restrictive rules to inspire creativity. I wondered if I might borrow from some of their practices.

The notion developed into the concept of writing and reading aloud (on my YouTube channel) 1000-word short stories inspired by and incorporating five random words. I visited the website textfixer.com to come up with the words, which proved particularly challenging. The American site tossed up such unique terms as "goldbricker" and "Badlands".

In true OuLiPo fashion, I decided the stories had to be exactly 1000 words long, not a word more or less. I began writing these stories daily, each of them inspired by the random associations of words thrust upon me by an unknowable algorithm. Many of these stories are contained in this book.

As time went on, I began to relax the arbitrary restriction on length. For the purposes of this book, the initially 1000-word stories have been edited without this constraint.

The title story and *Beeswax* are two examples of my original conceit. The former was inspired by ferment, duke, murderous, sanitary and Badlands. The latter incorporated gland, brood, queen, wrestle, and captain. I've provided an appendix of the stories included in this volume generated by this unusual technique, alongside the words which inspired them.

There are other, more longform tales in this book, written without using this strategy, as well as some noticeably miniature pieces composed for publications with their own brutal length restrictions (including *Antbots* and *Arrhythmia*). I hope their variety provides an opportunity to find a tale for each slice of time you'd like to fill, however short.

My rediscovery of the joys of short stories has proven a great comfort in the often lonely and fearful year we've all lived through. I feel I owe a debt to the masters of the form who have inspired me, amongst them Bernard Malamud, Ray Bradbury, Alastair Gray, Angela Carter, Donald Barthelme, Guy de Maupassant, M.R. James, and Raymond Carver.

I would also like to thank my parents, Ian and Kath, for putting up with my crazy creativity (as well as for designing this

book's cover, in my father's case). Gratitude is also due to my sisters Katy and Fiona and their families, for their ongoing support, as well as my friends Guy, Sara, Aradhna, Indy, Francesca B and Rob H, to whom I read some of these tales. Of course, I'm delighted that so many were published, and am indebted to the editors and readers of all the journals and websites listed in the frontispiece, for their belief in these stories.

I hope you'll enjoy this profusion of crazy tales. Many of them surprised even me with the paths they led me down, as well as the characters I met along the way. In part, I suppose, I was looking for people I could safely spend time with, without masks, social distancing, or hand sanitizer. I certainly found diverting company, and I hope that you do too.

London, 2021.

Leopold Wainwright III, lifelong off-grid eccentric and illegal distiller of unreasonably strong spirits, woke to the sound of his front door being mercilessly assaulted. It must be early – Duke the rooster had not yet crowed in that insistent way that would send Leo lurching downstairs with momentarily murderous intent, particularly on mornings after he had sampled a new batch of moonshine.

Leo tore open his front door and shouted at the trespassers, who were triply indistinct because he couldn't find his spectacles, was hungover and the screen door pixelated everything.

"Who in Satan's name are you? What are doing on my porch?"

Two figures, both slender and petite. Women?

"Mister, please, you gotta let us in. We ran out of gas."

Leo wasn't falling for that. Nine months previously, Mrs Gantry, who ran the pet store in town, was robbed at knifepoint after she took pity on a drifter with an empty guitar case that he filled with all her valuables (precious little, as it happened, so he took her head too).

"I have a loaded shotgun and I don't see well enough to wing you!" he replied.

Leo heard a vehicle approaching along the dirt track that led up from the highway. Given his deliberately remote location, Leo knew the second car was unlikely to betoken anything good.

"Round the back so I can get a look at you", Leo

ordered, grabbing the shotgun he kept by the door, which hadn't fired properly for several years.

The mystery couple raced around the building as the approaching car skidded to a halt. Leo squinted through the back-door spyhole and saw two dishevelled women, one with bright blue hair, the other sporting a nose ring and a fierce expression. They looked like bad news but the sudden rap upon the front door sounded worse. The dark-haired woman, who looked half Native American, was cradling something in her arms. A baby? Might be a scam, thought Leo, a doll swaddled to elicit sympathy.

"Please, we need somewhere to hide. The Feds want to take my baby."

Leo shuttled through a series of assumptions and counter-assumptions. He was fiercely anti-establishment, plus the woman's story was so peculiar it might just be true.

"FBI! Let us in." The tone and mandatory warning were familiar. Leo had just seconds to act. He opened the back door on its chain. The women were scarcely in their twenties, desperate and afraid.

"Lean-to out back. Take a couple of jars, fill your tank. Now run!"

The door burst in behind Leo as he heard the fugitives race away.

Running Coyote made it to the sheds first, with the baby held firmly to her chest. Melanie limped behind her, wondering how her day had gone so horribly wrong. A social worker who'd undertaken a routine evening call to visit single mum Coyote, she'd taken one look at the baby and had known that

the hysterical story the native American had told her might just be true. They'd driven through the night before the Feds had caught up with them.

Coyote pulled open the first door, revealing a cloud of flies and a stench that was far from sanitary. The john. She gagged and joined Mel as she entered the larger shed, which was dark and dank. There must be cans of gasoline somewhere. Mel found a switch; a dim bulb flickered on. The lean-to contained only a home-made still and a shelf of demijohns full of clear liquid. The air was thick with the ferment of mashed barley.

Mel unplugged a jar and recoiled at the smell of 80-proof alcohol.

"Jeez – man, this'll blind you."

Coyote looked panicky, her baby growing restless, gurgling slightly. "There's no gas, is there? He tricked us," she said, wondering why Mel was smiling.

"Nope," said Mel, holding out a hammer and a six-inch nail. Can you get to their vehicle unseen if I take the kid?"

Now it was Coyote's turn to run the risks. She nodded, handing Fallen Star over. Raised voices issued from the shack. It wouldn't be long before the Feds checked the outhouses.

Coyote used the skills her grandfather had taught her, dashing with grace and speed between rocky red outcrops until only a 20-yard sprint stood between her and the Feds' black sedan. A whirl of windblown dust provided the necessary cover. Moments later she crouched behind the car, took a deep breath, and drove the nail into the tyre. It burst with a low pop and Coyote raced to her own car, a

ramshackle 1972 Oldsmobile, where Mel was emptying a second demijohn into the tank.

"Will this work?" Coyote hissed, climbing behind the wheel as Mel tossed the jar aside and slid into the passenger seat, holding firmly onto Fallen Star, who was mewling softly.

Coyote gunned the engine, which spluttered inconclusively. The front door of the shack opened and two impressively tall men in dark suits emerged, eyes shaded behind standard issue Ray Bans.

"Stop where you are!" shouted one, raising his gun. Coyote turned the key again. The starter struggled, then the engine abruptly rumbled into life.

A warning shot blasted over their heads.

"They won't risk harming him!" Mel reassured Coyote as she spun the Oldsmobile, throwing up a spiral of dust. The Feds had jumped into their own vehicle.

"They'd better fucking not!" yelled Coyote, as they tore away down the track, through the baked red brutality of the Utah Badlands.

Growing restless in Mel's arms was the beautiful, strange hybrid Coyote had brought into the world, his wings struggling to unfurl, his green lizard eyes alive with intelligence, his voice like the music of distant nebulae – not crying so much as singing his frustration. Mel turned to see the Fed's car skid as it skittered three-wheeled behind them, losing pace.

They would make it to the border, where their strange little family could spread its wings, Fallen Star literally. Evolution couldn't be stopped – love would have its way.

Aloha

Professor Martin McCullers finally yielded to his twelve-year-old daughter Rosalie's insistent demands and agreed to show her the facility where the signal had first been detected. Nothing more, nothing less than the first detected utterance by an alien being. A single word containing both promise and ambiguity: *welcome*.

McCullers' pass-card still functioned, because he hadn't returned it as he'd been instructed to, and nobody had yet noticed. McCullers also hadn't informed either his daughter or his wife Melissa that he'd been fired from the Mount Braddock SETI project. Secrecy had become a way of life to Professor McCullers, or Marty, as he insisted his students address him.

"Go on, Dad, you promised!"

It hadn't so much been what Rosalie said, the habitual whine of an adolescent insisting on parental justice, as how she'd said it, with that plaintive head tilt and wide-eyed stare Marty could never say no to. So it was that on the evening of 12th February 2036, he drove his daughter from their home, nestling on the edge of the forest, up the winding single track roads to the rocky mountaintop facility.

Originally just an observatory, Mount Braddock was at the vanguard of quantum entanglement research. Just three weeks previously, a breakthrough had occurred which would change humanity's understanding of its place in the universe forever. Except, that is, if the government had its way.

McCullers' team at the facility had solved a problem

that had bothered SETI researchers for some time. If extra-terrestrial life were ever detected from alien signals broadcast across the universe, the distances involved would mean that the civilisations originating those signals would most probably have died out or significantly evolved in the thousands or even millions of years it had taken their signal to reach earth, let alone any reply. Conversations would become impossibly attenuated by the vast distances involved. McCullers explained this to his daughter.

"You know when there's a news broadcast and the presenter asks someone in another country a question, there's a delay before they hear the presenter's voice and can respond?"

"Yes. It's really annoying and they look really dumb."

"Well imagine that times a million million. Every light year, by definition, adds a year in signal transmission delay. If we get a signal back from Proxima Centauri, the nearest star to ours, then that signal was sent over four years ago. That's the best we can do, unless we somehow intercept an alien ship buzzing our solar system."

"So, talking to the aliens is pointless?" Rosalie asked, as they stood at the gates of the Braddock facility and Professor McCullers let them in with his passcode and thumbprint scan.

"Well, the usual method – monitoring likely electromagnetic signals – is really a branch of archaeology. The only meaningful message you could send that way would be 'Aloha'. Hello and goodbye in one expression. Now, our new method… well, that's where the magic lies."

"Quantum entanglement," Rosalie piped up. She

evidently had been reading the pile of books he'd placed by her bedside.

"That's right," he replied, proudly. "We take a cloud of particles in a Bose-Einstein condensate."

"A what whatty?"

"Just a bunch of really cold particles," he explained, as they entered his laboratory. Fortunately, nobody was still working this late. A strict 10pm curfew had been instituted recently – something to do with work-life balance. McCullers started flicking switches, booting up the "call box" as they colloquially called it. They didn't have long. He was sure they must have tripped a silent alarm somewhere.

"At just a fraction of a degree above absolute zero, we can make these particles act as if they are all identical. This means if we separate them and then alter one of them in some way, the other spatially-distinct particles all respond exactly like the one we're directly affecting."

"Like Newton's Cradle?"

McCullers shook his head. "No – that's the transference of kinetic energy between solid objects and it takes time. It looks instantaneous, but it takes a few microseconds before the ball at the far end moves in response to the first ball hitting the second. Quantum entanglement changes really do happen instantaneously, no matter how far apart the particles are removed from one another."

Rosalie looked confused as she slid into a swivel chair in front of one of the consoles.

"But nothing travels faster than the speed of light?"

"That's right. But there's nothing travelling in this

scenario. The particles really do become, to all intents and purposes, the same particle. Anyhow, this is how we came up with the Quantum Entanglement Communicator, or Queck. We have a lattice of entangled particles we can form into patterns – basically ones and zeroes. We've made an 8-bit communicator. A galactic pager. It's humanity's greatest invention since, well, the wheel."

"Cool. Lemme see…." Rosalie said, spinning her chair as McCullers finished powering up the device.

"We can probably only be here for a minute or two before they send someone," McCullers warned, "but we might get one of the Oglers online if we're lucky."

"Is that what the aliens are called?"

"That's just our nickname for the first race we identified. We classified their planet OGLE-2014-BLG-0124L. I know – catchy isn't it?" McCullers flicked one last bank of switches on and stood back.

A screen flickered into life and a cursor winked amidst the black. McCullers handed his daughter a wireless keyboard.

"Go on then, type."

What he was doing was an outrageous breach of protocol, but McCullers no longer cared. The US government had voted to cut funding to the program, and arrest anyone who spoke of it, under national security provisions. This seemed short-sighted, immoral, and deeply unfair to Rosalie's generation, who ought to know the wonderful truth that there were many civilisations out there in the vastness of interstellar space, and none of them had heard of Jesus, Jehovah, or Allah.

None of the intelligent species so far discovered, still had the concept of God. Earth alone had retained that hypothesis. The government felt that this knowledge would prove devastating to Earth's estimated five billion believers, and so it was deemed wisest to pull the plug. When McCullers had argued vehemently in a closed congressional hearing that this was wrong, he had been unceremoniously released from both his research role and his professorship.

What McCullers had done next was fuelled by frustration and rather too much Jack Daniels. He'd gone on Facecast, the instant video broadcasting platform, prepared a nest of juicy tags – aliens, alien life, SETI, religion, god, atheism, religion – and had released an eleven-minute rant which had instantly gone viral. No, scratch that, it had gone pandemic.

…they think you're sheep, moon-faced imbeciles who can't handle the truth. And it's a beautiful truth – we are NOT alone! There are incredible civilisations out these – tens of thousands of them. Wouldn't you trade that for your invisible space wizard? I mean, sure, you could make up a convoluted reason why God never mentioned these other planets, these infinite reaches of teeming life, but why would you want to? Throw away a bucket of pearls for a handful of sand? Anyway, you want proof, visit the following site…

He'd given a link to some of the early transmission recordings, from that first welcome to the higher dimensional mathematics that would keep human geniuses busy for decades. The illicit info-dump included the video feed in which a clever colleague had transposed the three-dimensional shapes that comprised Ogler language into musical chords, to help convey some of the wonder of their

strangeness. It produced the most beautiful, bizarre, and lushly avant-garde music – Arvo Pärt, György Ligeti and Sigur Ros jamming together across the aeons.

Of course, the powers that be had algorithms to shut down such seditious ideas and his broadcast eventually sank like a stone and was lost. But not before the ripples in the human pool were felt. People managed to access the material McCullers had leaked. Now they knew something that could not be unknown – nowhere in the vast reaches of space was there room for their tiny God.

There were riots, bible burnings, mosques and synagogues bombed, monks tearing off their cassocks in mass renunciations, priests hanging their dog collars on the handrails of bridges (and sometimes themselves from those self-same bridges). Opposing this was a retrenchment amongst some religious communities – a refusal to look at the evidence, a refusal to admit that evidence meant anything at all, when stacked against the monolithic consolations of faith.

To keep the peace, the government had declared SETI research a kind of intellectual terrorism. Some ideas, evidently, were just too dangerous to promulgate.

McCullers had largely sobered up by the morning after his diatribe, though not entirely. He immediately realised the danger he was in when he turned on the television. Chaos on the streets of the world's major cities. Endless pontification as to who was to blame for the explosions of anarchy and nihilism.

The Ministry would come for him, and that was okay. McCullers couldn't, however, let his beloved daughter

remain in ignorance. That was really why they had gone back to the observatory, against his wife's wishes. Melissa was calling him even now. McCullers could feel his earlobe vibrate as the callclip registered the signal. He touched the back of the device to reject the call. He'd explain later.

That morning, Melissa had packed their bags and formulated a plan. After dark, a family friend was going to smuggle them out of town in his truck. Although McCullers had disguised his appearance and voice in his rant, as well as his location, he knew MoRSE would find him sooner or later. They really ought to get going.

Rosalie, who from infancy had grown up with text communication as a natural way of engaging with other minds, was typing furiously. McCullers stopped her with a gentle hand upon her wrist.

"They've only just learned English. You'll have to us fewer words."

Rosalie hit the delete button and bit her lip, thinking intently.

"How far away are the Oglers?"

"Twenty-five thousand light years," McCullers replied. "You won't be meeting face to face anytime soon. I don't, to be honest, know if they even have faces."

Rosalie began typing again, more slowly this time:

HELLO! I'M ROSALIE. WHO ARE YOU?

They waited. Nothing happened.

"Might just not be online," McCullers replied. "Or they may just perceive time entirely differently from how we do. But that's a whole other con…"

His mental flow was interrupted by a cascade of letters appearing onscreen:

WE ARE LITHRICOPUS ANTANAA, WE ARE HAPPY OF SPEAK YOU

"They haven't quite got our grammar yet but bear in mind it's been only three weeks since we started talking," explained McCullers. Rosalie was already typing back.

HI LITHRI. HOW ARE YOU TODAY?

A much quicker response came through.

WE AM NOT TODAY, AM LITHRI

McCullers laughed. "You have to be really explicit, rather than ambiguous. I don't know if it's a linguistic or psychological barrier. The don't seem to have irony or idiomatic expressions or metaphor or anything like that."

Rosalie thought carefully, then typed:

ARE YOU WELL TODAY?

This proved much more successful. The reply appeared momentarily.

WELL THIS DAY, MANY GRATITUDES. SUNS ARE IN THE SKY, DROONITS ARE FLYING.

"They have three suns, would you believe?" McCullers whispered, as if somehow, the Oglers might hear him.

"Nuts!" said Rosalie. "What are droonits?"

"We think they're something like birds and something like pillowcases. We haven't been able to send anything like a drawing or a photograph yet. That was going to be our next project."

As McCullers finished talking, he heard the faint sound of tyres on gravel. Here we go, he thought. Rosalie hadn't noticed anything; she was far too focused. She would have

made a brilliant analyst. McCullers felt his eyes moistening, so saddening was the small-mindedness of the imbeciles shutting all this down. Whole new branches of science would be strangled at birth – the analytical study of an alien race would create whole new fields of study in sociology, psychology, biology and pretty much any discipline you could shove an exo- in front of.

McCullers felt he wanted to warn the Ogler, Lithri, that there might be no more communication for a while. While Rosalie considered what to type next, he quickly tapped out:

COMMUNICATION MAY BE INTERRUPTED. WE ARE SORRY.

And the reply came immediately:

WHY INTERRUPTED?

"I have no idea how to answer that," admitted McCullers, as half a dozen heavily armed soldiers led by Professor Lysander Street, McCullers' ex-boss. Street, in her early forties, stood an imperious six foot two and had a military bearing that would have been imposing even if she didn't have an armed guard with her. Rosalie ducked instinctively behind her father.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, McCullers?" demanded Street.

McCullers found himself shaking but managed to growl defiantly: "I am saying goodbye to our guests."

Street sighed, then turned to her reinforcements.

"A clear-up team will be here to strip it in an hour. For now, just render it inoperable, Captain."

The Captain, who looked scarcely thirty, seemed bewildered by the array of computers and gadgetry

surrounding him. His uniform featured an unusual insignia: MoRSE – the Ministry of Religion and Spiritual Enlightenment. .McCullers was impressed by how quickly a squad from the Ministry had got here.

"Destroy the consoles, man!" she ordered. "Use your rifle butt."

Professor McCullers couldn't believe he'd been fooled by Street for so long. She'd always been reluctant to outline her scientific credentials when he'd tried to engage her in conversation, so he'd just written her off as an administrator. Now he realised she'd been a government plant from day one, most likely a MoRSE spy. These men were her Ministry's ground troops.

Street advanced on McCullers, confused.

"Do you really not see why depriving the world of its source of consolation and hope, is a terrible idea?"

McCullers shook his head. "False consolation, illusory hope."

"Nevertheless…" began Street.

An explosion of sparks leapt from a bank of computers as the soldiers went to work. McCullers and his daughter backed away, aghast at the destruction. McCullers couldn't help but protest.

"The condensate will heat up! The particles will disentangle. This is cultural vandalism!" McCullers shouted, to no avail, as the screen containing Lithri's last words faded and blurred out to eternal darkness. It had taken four years for Voyager II to carry its payload of entangled particles out to the centre of the galaxy, awaiting an advanced civilisation to pick up the receiver, so to speak.

Now that connection had been irretrievably broken, and as far as Street and her goons were concerned, first contact with an alien species was consigned to a historical footnote, no doubt to be redacted out of existence. Well, that was the idea, at least.

McCullers knew the Oglers were themselves in contact with over three thousand other races. The outer reaches would not be silenced for long.

"Dad," whispered Rosalie from behind his shoulder, "That was amazing. I'll remember that forever."

If they let us live, thought McCullers, before dismissing the thought as melodramatic. Deep down, the forces of retrograde solipsism must know their days of self-enforced ignorance are numbered. He decided to let Rosalie into one more secret, whispering back:

"I didn't keep all the particles here. I sent batches of condensate out to a dozen other labs, in India, China, Britain, Switzerland, South Africa, and the international space station. They can't stop this."

Rosalie smiled a secretive smile and McCullers had a fleeting vision that she would one day lead the world towards universal unity, the ultimate goal of the Queck project – permanent links between all galactic civilisations and a realisation that we are not alone, and never will be again.

Marty McCullers gripped his daughter's hand tightly, as the technology fizzled and buzzed out of existence. The Luddites hadn't stood a chance and nor would Street and her MoRSE thugs. Communication was McCullers' religion, and the heretics would not be silenced.

"Aloha," Rosalie whispered. Goodbye and hello.

Merry Go Round

Alice's dates were amongst the saddest experiences she'd ever had. As a forty-five-year-old double divorcee, she'd had her share of disappointment. Somehow the four encounters Alice squeezed into the pandemic-restricted month of November 2020 felt desolate in a particularly demoralising way. Firstly, all of her dates were outdoors since meeting inside was disallowed. Secondly, because nothing was open, Alice was left with drizzly walks around local parks or through deserted city streets. Sometimes she'd get a takeaway coffee or cup of soup just to keep her hands warm.

Lastly, the kind of men who'd agree to meet a stranger for a melancholy stroll around a park, wearing surgical masks and dodging puddles and non-compliant strangers, were men seemingly lacking something vital. Chris, the tax auditor, had spoken entirely in non sequiturs, mostly about his narrowboat. Adam had been barely five feet tall, his deep booming voice oddly incongruous coming from such a slight frame. Rajinder was animated at first, and since he too was a designer, they had at least something in common. Then he got onto the subject of his children, who lived with their mother in Mumbai, and he simply burst into tears. Alice spent the remainder of their date boosting Raj's spirit, while she felt her own dwindle away.

Today she was with Karl, who was a doctor and a medical examiner, a job she hoped would be filled with excitement and intrigue.

"It's mostly certifying cause of death for RTA

victims, cancer patients and suicides," Karl confessed ten minutes into their wander down the South Bank.

"Tragic stuff," was all Alice could think to reply, half wishing she were back home, working on the academic book jackets she'd been putting off. The agency had been good to her, giving her a whole series to work on. She ought to be prioritising work.

"Not entirely, " said Karl, whose German accent was subtle and whose sensitive features now betrayed a flicker of amusement. "Last week I was called out to certify a fisherman who was removed from the Solent with a harpoon through his neck."

Alice wasn't sure if she was supposed to laugh at this, and Karl wasn't offering any social cues. It seemed that he hadn't finished his anecdote.

"But he didn't drown, and the harpoon wouldn't have killed him either. In fact, he died from anaphylactic shock from a peanut butter sandwich he'd taken a bite out of shortly before loading the harpoon gun. I had to explain this to his grieving widow."

Again, there was no indication that a humorous response was required.

"But my role is rarely as droll," said Karl, sinking back into a silence he seemed happy to let continue indefinitely. They had reached the peculiar chromium sculpture near the Hayward Gallery. Alice watched their figures warp and stretch across its surface. Raindrops ran down the scuffed metal in erratic rivulets.

"You don't enjoy it much," Alice said, cradling her latte. Karl took a sip of his green tea. He had long, delicate

fingers and for a brief moment Alice wondered if he would touch her as gently as he handled his silver Thermos cup. She shook away the idly erotic thought and awaited his answer.

"It's fulfilling, in a sense," he began. "I get the feeling I'm doing something useful. And I suppose I'm good at it, or I wouldn't be one of the few full-time examiners." Karl sounded like he was trying to convince himself as much as her.

"Not much joy in it though?" Alice asked rhetorically.

"That's it!" Karl said with surprising vigour, as they passed the closed bookshops and restaurants under the South Bank Centre. "I bring people the answers they need, but not the comfort they want."

Alice had a strong impulse to grab and squeeze his hand encouragingly. Karl was at least sensitive and thoughtful, qualities sorely lacking in both of her husbands. Sadly, the logistics wouldn't work, since they were both carrying drinks and umbrellas. She settled for a broad smile instead. Karl's eyes crinkled with amusement. He looked at least ten years older than his Tinder profile picture, but his slightly jowly face still had a handsome structure underpinning it. For some reason, the Shakespearian phrase chop-fallen flitted into mind.

Then she realised Karl wasn't smiling at her. He was looking at the whirling colour and noise of a distant merry-go-round. His brown eyes reflected the rotating horses as they approached from the desolate Christmas market under the Jubilee Bridges.

"We had such an amusement in my hometown, when I was a boy," he said. "I loved it."

Alice realised she hadn't asked him where he was from. Perhaps she could have a surreptitious look at his profile.

"It'd appear during Oktoberfest and stay until New Year".

Alice looked around at the serried ranks of wooden sheds, with single strings of bright yellow bulbs looped between them. Even if they were open, this place wouldn't hold a candle to any of the German Markets she'd seen in magazines.

"I've never been to a proper German Market", Alice said softly.

"You must go," Karl said, his face suddenly brimming with enthusiasm. The 'you' filled Alice with more sadness than she knew she could contain.

"Fancy a ride?" she said, half-joking.

"Yes," he said simply, with a look of gratitude on his face. Alice could suddenly see the boy this fifty-five-year-old man had once been. Stuffing his face with candyfloss, skipping through puddles with trailing shoelaces.

Buying two tickets from the surly-looking attendant, and concealing their possessions behind a bollard, they climbed upon the brightly painted horses, whose faces were frozen in manic expressions of equine joy. Wurlitzer music chimed out Good King Wenceslas as Alice and Karl rose and fell upon their steeds. One minute into the ride, Alice realised she was grinning from ear to ear, as was her beau.

Well, this is all right, Alice thought as Karl reached

across recklessly to squeeze her shoulder. She realised, with a shock of surprise, that she'd never been on horseback. There were just too many things Alice hadn't done; perhaps that would change.

Ten minutes later, feeling more than a little queasy from a combination of candyfloss, glühwein and needless rotation, Alice accepted Karl's gloved hand as she clambered down off her painted steed. They spent a very pleasant thirty minutes walking along the South Bank and then went their separate ways. Karl actually bowed as a socially distant equivalent of a cheek kiss. Alice would have preferred a handshake or even one of those awkward elbow bumps she'd seen Boris Johnson doing on the news.

Walking back to her flat, Alice realised they hadn't arranged a second date. She hadn't really expected to, but still felt a little disappointed that Karl had not seized the initiative. Weren't Germans supposed to be super organised, or was that assumption a bit xenophobic?

It came as a shock of relief therefore, as Alice got home, threw off her heavy coat, scarf, and gloves, to discover that Karl had texted already. What he had written made her laugh out aloud, in an involuntary response that would normally have made her idiotically self-conscious.

Have you ever been to a 1980s roller disco?

Alice had, and she had loved it with a vehemence entirely out of proportion with the reality of rolling round a darkened room wearing a tutu and deely-bobbers. She still had a pair of skates hidden in the back of her wardrobe, assuming they hadn't rusted away or been consumed by moths. Was Karl really suggesting they go roller-skating

together? Alice closed her eyes and tried to imagine it. Strangely, the image came quickly into focus and was remarkably convincing.

Karl and Alice whooshed by, arm in arm, emerging from a cloud of dry ice. Alice wore an expression of nervous excitement, Karl remained incongruously serious, as they attempted not to collide with the couple in front of them. Together they circuited a darkened room, illuminated by sweeping lasers, to the sound of 'Hey Mickey' by Toni Basil.

Alice found herself typing furiously.

Of course. And I loved it. What do you have in mind?

She had spent years of her life lost in the mistaken belief that love was a serious endeavour. The world had just revealed to her how inherently ridiculous the pursuit of a soulmate really is.

And Alice was okay with that. As she waited for Karl's reply, she went through to the bedroom, knelt before her walk-in wardrobe, and reached behind the coats. She had to stretch out with the fingers of her left hand.

There it was. The dull, ball-bearing-aided whirl of a rubberised wheel.

She would have to find some WD40.

Duet

Three months into lockdown Stella had settled into a comfortable, and comforting, routine. Stuck in her compact third floor flat in a line of Victorian terraces in West London, she was concentrating on writing songs for her debut album.

Her day began at eight am with coffee and toast and some vocal warm-ups before she kept her voice in shape with a few covers, performed to backing tracks she'd found online. Stella would video some of these for her YouTube channel which gratifyingly had received a spike in subscribers in the last few weeks – she had recently celebrated her ten thousandth follower. Eclectic in taste, her three biggest tracks were Al Green's 'How Can You Mend A Broken Heart', 'No Surprises' by Radiohead and Adele's 'Hello'. Her own songs tended towards the melancholy, particularly since her break-up with boyfriend of the past five years, Tony.

Two weeks ago, as Stella had been preparing to record a version of 'Let's Go Out Tonight', a little-known heartbreaker by cult Scottish band *The Blue Nile*, when she heard a rich, velvety voice from the flat next door, singing something operatic and Italian. Singing remarkably well, despite the accompaniment of an occasional crashing she could only imagine was the sound of a large, clumsy man putting pots and pans away. In part this image was aided by the fact that Stella had a couple of times bumped into her new neighbour a week or so before the pandemic started, both times in the hallway outside their flats.

On the first occasion, the man, in his early fifties and

very overweight, had been struggling upstairs with an armful of plants. From the nearby garden centre, Stella guessed. He'd fought to fish his keys out of his pocket and Stella had been too slow to offer to help. The second time she'd seen Mr Adamson (Stella had seen his name on his mail) he'd been rushing downstairs, immaculately dressed in a tuxedo and white bow tie. Stella had offered 'nice suit', in passing, a daft understatement meant as a genuine compliment. Her neighbour had grinned, taking the comment in the spirit in which it was intended.

Now, listening to Mr Adamson sing, Stella suddenly understood the meaning of the tuxedo – her neighbour was an operatic tenor, presumably on the way to a concert, in the vintage Alfa Romeo she'd seen parked outside.

Now, as she listened to the tenor's aria, a melancholy floating, drifting melody, she later discovered was Donizetti (after much Googling), Stella's initial annoyance that her latest video couldn't be recorded gave way to grudging admiration. Mr Adamson could really sing. Her Googling had not thrown up any famous tenors of that name, so she guessed, like her, he was firmly in the category of gifted amateur, albeit one able to play the kind of gigs that required dress shirt and tails. Someone she had first dismissed as an eccentric old goat was recast in her imagination in an entirely new light.

The following day, Stella heard Mr Adamson doing her own warm-up exercises, a series of rising and falling scales in a variety of keys. She wondered if, like her, he had perfect pitch, or whether he used an app or tuning fork to hit the right starting note. She found herself falling into unison with

him, rising and falling in sync with his notes, albeit a register higher. After a few minutes of this, Mr Adamson seemed to stop mid-scale. Had he heard her? Stella decided she didn't care and finished the set of scales anyway.

Later that afternoon, Stella heard Mr Adamson singing the same Donizetti aria on his balcony. She felt a little too shy to step out there to listen, so she stood behind the billowing curtain in the overheated room and listened to the street applauding his efforts. Even the workmen digging up the street below had downed their tools, Stella could see, peering through her curtains. Of course, she added her own applause to the impromptu audience's.

Suffering as she did from both Crohn's Disease and a mild form of agoraphobia, Stella had scarcely been out for days, but later that evening, she decided to venture out onto her own balcony, which she mostly used for drying laundry. Pushing the rack of skirts and skimpy tops to one side, she closed her eyes, leaned against the doorframe, and sang 'If You Go Away', the English lyrics of the magnificently over the top Jacques Brel song she'd played on constant rotation in the week following her break-up. The street outside was quiet and Stella didn't really care if anyone was listening or not.

Halfway through the song, a strange low descant seemed to join her voice. Stella realised it was Mr Adamson, humming a low accompaniment, above which her own voice floated, like a seabird drifting upon a dark ocean. It was strangely self-effacing, given what Stella knew his voice was capable of, but it really added a powerful underscore to the song. After the last 'if you go away…' faded, a rapturous

applause followed and Stella opened her eyes to see, with astonishment, a small gathering of people on the balconies across the street, or on the pavements below. All were looking up at her and clapping. Stella turned to applaud Mr Adamson, who was standing beaming broadly on his own tiny balcony.

"Take a bow, my dear, you were magnificent," he said, making Stella's day.

Thus, they finally broke the ice between them and began chatting, daily, between their balconies, about music, performance, lyrics, work, and many more unrelated topics. Mr Adamson gifted her one of his plants, a small rosebush. In return, Stella loaned him the cookery book in which she'd found the recipe for cheese scones, after he commented on the delicious smell wafting out of her kitchen window (she later passed over a Tupperware box containing three scones).

They began to duet, across their balconies, on pop songs, after Stella confessed that she couldn't read music. "What a shame," Mr Adamson said. "I have the perfect Donizetti duet." Stella was flattered but bemused by the very idea of singing opera. After all, she had no formal training in such music and knew little or nothing about it.

"Hush dear, you're a natural," her neighbour said, "but we can stick to Simon and Garfunkel if you prefer."

They essayed 'Bridge over Troubled Water', 'The Boxer' and 'America' before moving on to Cole Porter, 'Something Stupid' and 'Body and Soul'. Stella didn't try to foist anything too modern on Mr Adamson, whose popular music tastes didn't extend much into this millennium, and Mr Adamson didn't try to push any Italian opera on Stella,

although she loved hearing him sing it.

Like Stella, seemingly like a lot of people in the transient neighbourhood of Earls Court, Mr Adamson lived alone, and presumably he was also having a hard time with this period of self-isolation, being a confirmed bachelor (Stella suspected he was gay and that there was tragedy in his romantic history, but she didn't pry). Knocking on his door to offer him a cup of tea might be forbidden but they could at least converse across their respective balconies, in words, and via their shared love of song.

Then, one day in early June, the duets stopped. Stella no longer saw Mr Adamson around and she wondered if he had moved away, or taken advantage of things opening up a little, to go and visit friends or relatives. It was only when she heard unfamiliar voices from the apartment next door that she decided to investigate. Venturing out into the hall, she tiptoed to the door of flat 7 and listened intently. A male and a female voice could be heard, talking in low tones.

"I guess the rest can go to charity."

"Whatever. Look, do you want the filing cabinet?"

Before knowing quite why, Stella knocked on the door. When it was opened, Stella found herself face to face with a large-boned and rather plain girl in her mid-twenties who was clearly Mr Adamson's daughter, a fact that was both incontrovertible and surprising. The likeness unsettled Stella a little and made her fumble her words. She backed away to an appropriate distance.

"Em, I'm… sorry to disturb. I'm from next door. I haven't seen Mr Adamson around. Is he okay?"

As soon as Stella finished her question, the answer was

evident from the girl's expression. The girl, Sophie, revealed that her father had suffered breathing difficulties in the middle of the night a couple of weeks previously and had been taken by ambulance to hospital and there diagnosed with Covid-19. He was put on a ventilator and treated assiduously by his nurses but died after several days of struggling on life support.

Adamson's funeral had been held yesterday. Today Sophie and her fiancé Mike were going through his possessions and deciding what was to be done with them. Hearing this, Stella felt a strange sense of dislocation – her last memory of Mr Adamson was of him in full voice, belting out a rendition of Amazing Grace that drew an audience of several dozen wildly applauding neighbours and passers-by. To imagine those fine lungs choked and ruined by a virus in a matter of ten days, seemed bizarre and frightening. True, she had heard some coughing now and again through the wall between their flats, but it hadn't seemed unusual or life-threatening.

Stella found herself ending the conversation rather abruptly, with a promise to keep in touch (Sophie and Mike had some notions about holding a memorial concert for their father and perhaps Stella could sing). Sophie and Mike seemed lovely and said they recognised her from the YouTube links their father had sent them. The had been meaning to knock on her door to thank her for enriching their father's last days. Stella felt touched but a little embarrassed too. It wasn't as if she'd got to know her neighbour especially well, save for their shared love of music. Nevertheless, she agreed to contribute to the memorial and

then decided to pay him a personal tribute.

Of course, there was only one composer she could choose to celebrate her neighbour. As she couldn't read music and had little practical knowledge of singing in an operatic style, Stella set about learning new techniques and memorising a piece of Donizetti by ear. It was a beautiful and sad aria from his opera about Lucia of Lammermoor and involved only a limited range of vocal pyrotechnics. Nevertheless, Stella took a full two weeks to reach a standard she felt able to submit to public scrutiny and even then, on just the first three and a half minutes of the piece.

She set up her phone on the balcony, propped up against some books and plugged in her vocal microphone. Then she started the video recording and said the following:

"This song is for my neighbour, Mr Adamson, who sadly passed away from Coronavirus a few weeks ago. I wanted to perform a piece by one of his favourite composers and although I'm not an operatic soprano, I'll try my best to do it justice."

Then she began to sing, filling her lungs with life-giving air, forcing it through her straining vocal cords, letting the notes resonate deeply in her chest. Stella sang like she never had before, and people stopped in the street and squinted up against the sunlight. She could still feel Adamson's eyes on her, somehow, although she didn't turn to look at his balcony, for fear of seeing him there, or for sorrow at his absence.

Stella's high, pure voice cut through traffic and building work sounds, it stopped people in their tracks and echoed in the terraced streets. Stella sang of tragic loss and regret and

her voice bore testimony to her loss, and the world's.

A Clearing

Running saved me. It sounds hyperbolic but I wouldn't still be here, engaged in the banal act of assembling an Ikea bookcase (or avoiding doing so, if I'm honest), if it weren't for the simple act of putting one foot in front of another, at speed, through the English countryside.

When my marriage fell apart, it prompted a period of retrenchment and isolation. My wife and I had been gnawing away at one another for years, our arguments increasingly futile, repetitive, and vitriolic. She wanted me to be more decisive, to take more responsibility or, at the very least, to appreciate how much slack she picked up in our partnership. I wanted her to relax more, fret less, let go of past failures and accept that we will never achieve more than a fraction of our overweening ambition.

In effect, we were saying to one another 'I wish you could be a different kind of person'. There was of course, a ready solution to this intransigent dilemma – we split up and found other people. Diane met a young man whose online fabric retail business was booming in a way my career as a novelist clearly was not. I found someone else to spend quality time with – myself.

We sold the house and divided the proceeds, I took the campervan we rarely used, she kept the car. We went our separate ways, Diane to move immediately in with Masood, which I smugly knew was a mistake she'd greatly regret, me to a folly on the Kentish coast, a ramshackle barn I'd decided to renovate, whilst living in the van. I think the audacity of this decision is in part explained by my desire to show that I could have been the man of action and responsibility that Diane had always wanted, as if this would somehow prove a sweet revenge, rather than an onerous and expensive ordeal.

Nine months later, I'd project managed the three-hundred-year-old barn, which overlooked a ragged crescent of seashore, into a barely watertight bolt hole. Storms and seasons did what they could to reduce my ambitions to rubble but, watching my savings dwindle away to nothing, I finally moved into my new home as autumn began to give way to the inevitable chill of winter. Only the bathroom and one bedroom were complete but at least I didn't feel like a vagrant squatting in an unheated van at the edge of a building site. The workmen went about their days, nodding amiably to me as I went about mine – answering long-avoided emails and trying to plot out a new book.

One problem immediately presented itself. I'd successfully distracted myself from the depressing realities of my life but now that the house was becoming habitable, memory and regret moved in with me. They were not convivial housemates.

When I needed to escape the solitude and the seething tumult of memories and regrets, I'd go for a run, rediscovering an activity from my youth I'd long abandoned. I started with the occasional jog along the coastal path, adding a mile or two each week. My first run ended with me collapsing onto the pebbles covering the beach with lungs ablaze and heart thundering like a herd of rhinos. I coughed compulsively for over an hour – the detritus of eight years of juvenile smoking catching up with me. My bad habits ended with my marriage. Or perhaps I should say that new ones took their place.

From this first agonizing jog, I gradually built up my stamina until I could manage seven or eight miles in the space of an hour. Then, looking for variety, I discovered a drove path leading up into the hills and skirting a small patch of woodland I felt immediately drawn to. It had the evocative name of Weirwynd Wood and was evidently listed in the Domesday book (or so a helpful tourist information plaque informed me). A stile and finger post invited me in, and I clambered over and quickly lost myself in a crisscrossing network of paths and streams ribboning their way down the hillside to the sea below.

From the forest, the perpetual wash of surf was mixed with the rustling of the leaf canopy and the grace notes of birdsong, ceaseless and varied. On that first forest run, I could name very few of the birds that perched in the branches above me as I ran, but after just a few weeks I knew them by their melodies. They were my unseen companions and I even tried to mimic their music in a faltering whistle, to no great effect.

After six months, satisfied that my home was watertight and windowed and leaving the workmen to electrify, plaster and plumb, I began to take longer and longer morning runs. In part this was to get away from the incessant hammering and drilling, as well as the necessity of a small talk that didn't come naturally to me. The builders came from as far away as Latvia and Lesotho, but I didn't want to become their friend and couldn't abide their well-meaning but banal questions. So, I was a writer – wow. Where did I get my ideas? What was I working on now? Would I have written anything they'd know? I had answers for all of the above – from the junkyard of my memories, a middling, derivative thriller, and no, I have not – but I knew these would sound glib, dismissive and self-loathing. Instead of failing to connect, I absented myself.

I kid myself that these daily long runs were building towards something – perhaps I'd enter a marathon or undertake some sort of adventure – running the coast of Britain, perhaps. I told myself that although I wasn't writing my book, and hadn't really worked effectively for weeks, my subconscious was laying the groundwork. Ideas were percolating, plot lines taking shape. In truth, I was running from the tyranny of a blank screen and avoiding my agent's calls.

As autumn gave way to winter, and the trees of the forest shed their crisped parchment leaves, I ran with memories gasping to catch up with me. The way Diane would spontaneously massage my shoulders after a long day at my desk. The window box garden I surprised her with when she returned from a business trip overseas. Drinking wine and listening to Joni Mitchell, making love in the attic in a nest of dusty old blankets.

One morning I tore open the mail, nodding a terse thank you to Keith, the local postman, as he wobbled away on his bike. Inside a crisp white A4 envelope was a sheaf of papers, signed and expensively letterheaded. Brickman, Lewis and Partners. Decree Nisi. So, this was it. I'd known it was coming. We'd decided not to wait for the formalities before disentangling our lives but somehow seeing it in print made my knees weaken and my chest tighten with anxiety. I considered having a drink, but I'd always told myself that so long as I didn't start morning drinking, I was still a civilized member of the human race, no matter how attenuated my circumstances became. I laced up my running shoes, choosing the Saucony trail pair I'd just worn in. I had to run. Nothing else could take me away from the spiralling sadness beginning to fill me.

Almost angrily, I set off along the coastal path, ignoring puddles and patches of mud, revelling in the fact that I could just splash and slosh through them. It felt like a minor superpower at times, this ability to race through terrain hikers and dog walkers would pick their way around. I loved the fact that my legs were soon streaked with mud up to the knees. It didn't bother me that my feet were soaking wet. I wanted this run to be extreme, to take me to a place where the physical intensity of my movement obliterated the clamour my head. I achieved this about four miles in, when pausing to gasp for breath at a familiar gate, I had to decide whether to turn back or head up the footpath to Weirwynd Wood. As I weighed the pros and cons, something cold and wet touched my cheek. For an absurd moment, I thought it might be a tear, until I realize that it was something rarer still – a snowflake. I looked up and a swirl of flakes was falling from a sky that had whitened without me noticing.

The weather made my decision for me – it would be wonderful to run in the forest in the snow. I climbed the fence and headed up the tussocky slope to my left, making for the gnarled nest of bare trees that decorated the hillside. As I got closer, breathing laboured but refreshed by the newly icy air, the trees looked somehow forbidding and inviting at once – a challenge and a promise of the kind of intensity I was seeking.

As I squeezed through the narrow gap in the fence surrounding the wood, I saw that the snow had already salted the ground with a thin layer that was quickly accumulating, obscuring the chilled earth and mouldering leaves beneath. Seasons don't so much supplant one another here as crossfade. The winter would preserve some of those autumn leaves well into spring and impetuous crocuses would start appearing through the frost on the sun-facing slopes in a matter of weeks.

I ran the now-familiar outer loop of the forest, splashing through the streams and watching my breath gust out around me, as if I were generating the mist that was beginning to settle on the hillside. I dug into the forest, following my instinct, and soon found myself in a region I'd not visited before, where the trees thinned out into a clearing at the top of a small rise. A horseshoe of oaks and maples faced me, a large, gnarly yew in the centre, its corded trunk twisted into a profusion of branches. I slowed to a walk, catching my breath, emerging from my own cloud. I walked up to the yew and felt its ancient bark. I'd read somewhere that yews are amongst our oldest trees. I guessed that this one might be hundreds, even thousands of years old. Carved into its thick bark were dozens of letters and dates. Carved initials, hearts, and declarations. Josie 1975. B & L '22. Others that could no longer be deciphered – the decades had eradicated their promises.

Two letters were carved inside a near-perfect circle, decorated with diamond patterns. An E and an S. I guessed these were the initials of the artist but what he or she had meant by their handiwork, I couldn't guess. Perhaps simply to assert that 'I was here' in an age before everyday identity was immortalized, fixed, and copied endlessly in a digital realm. ES had no web presence, but he had this.

I took a swig from the bottle of water I carried with me, turned, and ran back down the slope, taking a different route, with the intention of emerging on the high edge of the wood. But somehow, I found myself looping alongside an impenetrable hedge and back down, over a slope of tangled roots, then taking a sudden turn through a dense thicket and back into… the same clearing I'd just left. I laughed at my error and decided to retrace my footsteps and leave Weirwynd the way I entered it. The snow was now lying two inches deep and making everything look different from how it had upon my arrival. Boughs dipped low with their burden and there were no footsteps to follow.

Nevertheless, I reversed the sequence of turns I'd taken to get here – left, right, right, left, over the fallen log and finally…. no, that's not right. I'd reached a fork in the pathway. I must have missed it on my way into the wood, but I now realized I had no idea which way to go.

Just then a muffled sound could be heard, its source apparently some way down the left path – a girlish laugh, perhaps, although it had been brief. That decided it, I'd run that way and if I met a local, so much the better – he or she could redirect me if I'd gone astray. I felt the first finger of a chill grip me – the sweat cooling against my skin. The thin jacket I'd worn was now completely ineffectual against a rising wind that blew directly into my face, swirling flakes up my nostrils as I ran. I'd normally have enjoyed the extremity of it all, but something felt wrong, and not at all entertaining.

Surely, I'd been running for far too long now. No more peals of laughter sounded, and I met nobody, but it didn't matter – I should definitely have reached the edge of the woods by now. And yet, the gently curving path ahead of me, though encouragingly wide, seemed impossibly long. Had I somehow got turned round? Perhaps I should head back to that junction. My forehead felt cold, and I could sense a headache coming on. Why had I chosen to wear a thin cap instead of a proper woolly hat? I turned and looked back, just in time to catch a hint of movement, a rustling in the underbrush.

"Hello?" I called, not expecting a reply from what was probably just a badger or fox.

The trail of my footprints was already filling in with fresh snow. How quickly the world erases us, how indifferently our flickering lives register against the centuries, I thought, filing the phrase away for future use. I took a few long, icy breaths to calm myself and ran on. It didn't matter which way I was heading now. I had to keep moving. Something was gripping me, something familiar I hadn't felt since the drive south after the separation. I felt fear – a kind of grinding terror that everything which made sense was slipping away. As if the reality I'd built was tissue thin and I might tear through it with one ill-timed stumble.

I came to a narrowing in the path and squeezed between two trees, only to realize that the tree to my right was the now-familiar yew tree with the carved initials. I was back in the clearing again. This time I didn't laugh. Something was happening here – either inside me or beyond my understanding. I couldn't decide which option was more terrifying. I backed away from the yew, into the centre of the clearing and

looked up into its spindly branches, which stretched into a seemingly impenetrable nest about twenty feet above my head.

Climb. The word seemed spoken aloud, but I knew its source was within my head. A young female voice, gently insistent. Should I? I used to love climbing trees and besides, I might be able to see out over the canopy and find my way out of this green and white labyrinth. As I took the first handhold, I realized that the birds had stopped singing. Huddled against the snow or holding their breath? Waiting to see if I would dare venture into their domain, perhaps.

My muscles were aching from the run, and the cumulative effect of the many months of manual labour and long, soul-cleansing runs. Nevertheless, I found the nub of a cut branch low enough to get my leg over and pulled myself up with both hands until I flopped over the lowest limb. I was an ungainly climber, very different from the monkey-like child I'd once been. Each tentative step onto a higher branch now came with an inner admonishment – this is dangerous.

Quickly though, I was high enough to grab hold of the lower branches of the tangled nest that crowned the tree. I must have been about fifteen feet from the ground, but it felt like a hundred. I stretched a foot out but couldn't quite make the necessary next step. I'd have to jump. This was stupid. I should climb down. If I fell, I'd surely break something, and nobody would find me until morning.

I leapt, slipped, and slapped my knee against the trunk, grabbing serpentine branches to arrest my fall. Pain flared under the patella. I would pay for this misadventure. My misstep only made me more determined, and I stretched up with both hands and pulled myself into the heart of the tree.

Unfortunately, I was several feet yet from being able to see out over the treetops. I stopped to catch my breath and watch it billow out before me. For a second, it almost seemed to take the shape of a face, a female one, then it dissipated. A trick of the light, or of the dark, for certain.

Three or four minutes later, I had shinned up the next stout section of trunk, and was holding on for dear life, as the tree gently swayed back and forth over the forest canopy.

I stepped out onto a limb, braced myself, and looked. I was right in the middle of the forest, but I could see the road beyond the southern perimeter, and a thin blue-grey line of sea beyond the distant cliffs, although the whole scene was blurred by the incessant snow, tumbling down from a white sky turning pink along the horizon. It must be close to four o'clock; nightfall wasn't far off. Encouraged that I now knew where I was going, I was about to begin the challenging descent when I froze. I'd felt a tiny puff of warmth at the back of my neck. Wet warmth. Something unmistakable – breath.

I span round, but nothing was there. I listened. There was a slight gasp, as of indrawn air. Was someone holding his or her breath – someone other than me? Of course, I was alone in the tree, my imagination running rife against the background hum of nameless fear, the primal, animal sense of foreboding we can feel in wild, natural places.

I began stiffly to climb down, being especially careful to have three solid foot- or handholds, before choosing the fourth. I made it back down to the nest of branches and was squinting down through the boughs, choosing a safe route down, when something moved below, something pale and oval – a face, with straw-blonde hair half-hidden under a lacy bonnet and eyes stark, wide, and terrifyingly green. Skin almost translucently white, like the snow. A sorrowful stare, moving behind a trellis of branches and then slipping away into darkness.

I panicked, knowing instinctively that the person watching me was not quite of this world. My left foot slid off a limb caked with snow and green moss and I thudded down onto an unyielding bough, grasping blindly for a branch. The one I grabbed broke entirely away from the nest, through which I inevitably tumbled, crashing to the ground on my upper back and shoulders and rolling onto my side. A spike of pain and a cold stab of fear suffused me. I opened my eyes, curled in a foetal position among the roots of the yew and found I was still grasping the broken branch.

But when I looked at it, planning to use it as a crutch to lift myself to my feet, I discovered it wasn't a branch. It was a bone – probably a shinbone – grey-green with lichen and the dirt of ages. It was then

that I must have passed out, the last sound I heard a ripple of girlish laughter.

"Ah, he's coming to now, poor lad."

A kindly voice insinuated itself into my consciousness and I opened my eyes to find a stout, concerned woman in her sixties dabbing my brow with a warm cloth, soaked in something stringently herbal. I started instinctively.

"Don't worry dear, you're amongst friends now," my nurse said.

I turned my head, saw a sideways confusion that resolved into a cosy cottage interior – a slightly chintzy attic bedroom, with a sloped ceiling on one side. A familiar, stick-thin figure tottered into the room from the top of a staircase carrying a tray loaded with tea things. The village postman – Keith – out of uniform but instantly recognizable from his gait. He winked, his angular, weathered face mischievous.

"I told you running in all weathers wasn't good for you," he admonished, setting down the tray. "This is Margery, my wife."

I sat up a little against plump cushions and attempted a smile of gratitude, although I was both bewildered and in an alarming amount of pain.

"Here, take these," Margery said, popping two pills into my mouth and letting me wash them down with a sip of water from a glass she held out. "Painkillers – got them for my back. They work wonders."

I didn't bother to work through the sense, or lack of it, of swallowing the mystery medication – I was in too much agony not to comply. And wonderfully, within twenty minutes, the pain did lift, and I was able to sit up against the pillows.

Over a cup of tea (I am something of a caffeine addict, so this intervention was much appreciated) Keith explained how I'd come to end up in his spare bedroom. He'd been cycling back from his rounds, eager to get back to the warmth of home, when he'd seen something unusual – what looked like a body slumped against a hawthorn hedge on the fringes of the forest.

I stopped him there. "Did you say on the edge of the forest?"

"That's right," he explained. "Where the burn vanishes into the culvert. "Just off the road."

"And how was I lying?" I asked. Keith frowned as if this was rather beside the point.

"You were sort of sitting up, in that bit that overhangs. Were you trying to get out of the snow?"

I shook my head, baffled. I'd fainted under the tree, hadn't I?

"Anyways," Keith continued. "I thought you were a goner. You were still breathing but shivering all over and not responding to me at all. I called Marge and she drove down, and we got you back up here in the car. Doc's on the way but he's coming from Margate – only the coastal road's open. It's fair coming down out there."

Margery then elaborated on my recovery, an improvised process involving an electric blanket, hot water bottles and a balaclava. Apparently, I'd been delirious for a couple of hours before finally falling into a comfortable sleep. It was now nine o'clock and I gratefully accepted the Cloughs' offer to stay the night. After a hot bath that finally thawed the last remnants of the cold from my bones, I sat down to dinner with Keith and Margery. As his wife ladled hot stew onto my plate, Keith suddenly bolted, long-limbed, from the room. He returned holding something silvery.

"I nearly forgot… you were clutching this in your hand. I could barely get your fingers off of it."

He dangled a piece of jewellery at me – a silver locket, antique, on a thin chain. I took it, quite sure I'd seen it before but uncertain where. On its front, the locket had an unusual design – a snake coiled in a circle, eating its tail.

"Ouroboros," Margery said, surprising only me.

Keith nodded proudly. "She does the crossword every day. Is she a relative of yours?"

Keith was indicating the locket. I pressed the tiny catch on its side and opened it up. Inside was a blurry photograph – the defiant face of a young girl, fair-haired and pale, with a penetrating gaze.

"I don't know her," I lied.

It was several days until I felt well enough, and the roads were clear enough, for me to venture into town. Keith drove me home the afternoon after my accident. The barn, although watertight, now proved itself to be far from airtight, as icy winds howled through the boards of the angled ceiling. I had the same dream for three nights in a row – I'm running in the wood and a girl (or perhaps two girls) are running after me and laughing. When I turn around, I see nobody, only my own footsteps fading away into nothingness. Sometimes it felt more like a memory than a dream.

My head was ablaze with questions and I was almost feverish with the need to know more about the wood and its uncanny inhabitant. More prosaically, I knew I had to report the mysterious shinbone to the local police. I had two house calls to make.

Walking into town to exercise my aching limbs, I wandered into Remington's Antiques House, a cornucopia of ancient tat whose window I'd examined several times since I moved to the village, although I'd never been in. A bell rang above the door as I entered a musty, dusty storehouse of forgotten things.

An ornate dresser was heaped with mother-of-pearl inlaid jewellery boxes. A chaise longue was the resting place for a pyramid of greying books. A stack of old tennis racquets leaned against an ornate Japanese screen. In pride of place was a fully rampant stuffed bear, wearing a lady's hat, wide-brimmed and decorated with purple paper roses.

One the far side of the room, lit by a shaft of tobacco-stained sunlight, was a glass counter under which sparkled a dragon's horde of bangles, necklaces, tiaras and cufflinks. Behind this was the round, jovial face of a woman I'd passed in the street several times and smiled back at.

"You'll be the new tenant at Forgehead Farm," she said, extending a ruddy hand.

"Owner actually," I said. "For my sins. I'm sorry, I don't know…"

"Jill Remington, daughter of the famous Bill," she replied.

I assumed I was supposed to know who the famous Bill was but didn't ask for clarification.

"I've been meaning to come in for ages," I lied. "I found something in the wood, and I wondered if you might be able to shed some light on it."

I felt a flicker of hesitation about handing the locket over, then a suggestion of breath on my neck (but it was merely a two-bar heater with a fan, stationed nearby on a pile of old magazines).

Jill studied the locket, pushing a pair of reading glasses further up her nose. She didn't speak for almost a minute and I began to wonder if something was wrong. I was about to clear my throat, but abruptly, Jill straightened and announced:

"You're in luck. As well as running this place, I'm the chairperson of the village historical society, and I know exactly who that is. Her name is Elizabeth Bailey."

Jill then proceeded to tell me an extraordinary story. Elizabeth has been the youngest daughter of the Hedgecombe family, who had owned Forgehead Estate. The one-hundred-acre estate had once included the farmhouse whose haybarn I was currently renovating. The manor on the Northern side of the hill, beyond the forest, was in fact still under the ownership of a branch of the venerable Hedgecombe dynasty. Their lineage went back at least four centuries.

Elizabeth had lived in the manor with her two older brothers, mother, father, and several enormous deerhounds.

The Hedgecombe daughter was born around 1895, Jill thought, although some of the parish birth records appeared to be incomplete in that period. What could be gleaned from the meticulously maintained household ledgers is that, as well as the usual transient servants and old retainers, the family obtained the services of a French au pair and live-in tutor around the turn of the century, Madame Bouvier. The Madame brought with her from Epernay, her own daughter Elodie, just two years Elizabeth's junior. The innovative notion was that the girls would be co-educated by Madame Bouvier and learn one another's languages and cultures.

The two became fast friends, and in their teens scarcely separable. So much so that when they were

finally separated, following Madame Bouvier's dismissal for instilling unwholesome morals in the girls, and an unnamed outrage the local newspapers would not elaborate upon, both girls wept for days. Two weeks later, as Madame Bouvier packed her things in a local guesthouse, with the plan of returning home to France, her daughter Elodie vanished. She was never seen again, without even a letter to explain her whereabouts or any witnesses to shed light on the disappearance. The village feared the worst and to their credit, the Hedgecombes paid for a thorough search involving the police, coastguard and every able-bodied man and woman in the locality. It was to no avail.

"And what happened to Elizabeth?" I asked.

Jill sighed, as if delivering recent bad news.

"I'm afraid she went quite mad, had to be committed and caught the Spanish flu from a fellow inmate. She died the day before her sixteenth birthday."

I shivered, despite the heater liberally roasting my rear nearby. I looked at my watch, hastily thanked Jill for her information and headed uphill to the little local police station.

The following morning a cherry-picker was arranged, and a screen assembled around the yew tree. I was allowed inside to direct the forensic team and the arborealist they had called upon to oversee the removal of Elodie Bouvier's remains from the tree. Photos were taken of the position of the bones, which I found surprising – were the police really going to investigate a century-old tragedy?

Also at hand was a well-dressed and shivering aristocratic man in his fifties. He introduced himself as Alasdair Hedgecombe, and he was the great, great grandson of Elizabeth's elder brother Michael.

"I felt it fitting to draw a line under this… smear upon our family. I believe my ancestors did this poor girl a grave disservice."

I wasn't exactly sure what he meant until the forensic team carried the bones down from the yew and laid them upon a tarpaulin. They had also found an empty bottle of a popular opiate, once used to alleviate gout, and quite lethal if drunk in a large enough dose. To think that a vibrant soul now amounted to little more than this collection of forgotten fragments seemed deeply sad. What made the tears come, however, were the words Elodie had written in her faltering English on the scrap of miraculously preserved paper in her pinafore pocket.

My heart lies here because my love will not. Elizabeth you were my beloved and if they don't accept, is the world's loss. I will always be your cherie.

I remembered a detail Jill had told me about the ouroboros design on the locket, now clearly a love token.

"The Victorians we're obsessed with symbols," she had said, "and you need to be careful how you decode them. Nowadays we see the snake eating its tail as an emblem of futility, of something sinister, of doom even. At the turn of the century it meant unending love, the circle of life, an eternal pledge."

I didn't give the locket to Jill, or to the police. I wear it around my neck whenever I run in the Weirwynd Wood, as I am no longer afraid to do. I wear it to remind me that some loves never end, even though mine did. I wear it to remember Elodie and Elizabeth, to grant them the forgiveness they were never allotted in life.

No living relative locatable, the remains of Elodie Bouvier were interred in the Hedgecombe family plot, within sight of the house and the woods they loved to explore together. Elizabeth's grave was within touching distance of Elodie's. The burial was a fitting and graceful ceremony, attended by a handful of villagers, including Keith, Margery, and Jill, and presided over by Michael Hedgecombe, who I noted was accompanied by his husband Louie. I now realized why the tragic suicide of his ancestors' *amour fou* meant so much to him. I wasn't entirely clear why it meant so much to me.

Except, delirium and hallucinations notwithstanding, I somehow believed I knew Elizabeth and Elodie. I had looked into the deep green eyes of one, felt the other's breath. Elodie had entrusted me with her keepsake, and I believed Elizabeth had saved my life by bringing me, somehow, to the edge of the

wood.

As I watched a light smirr drift over the graves of the two girls, I knew that, touching as the ceremony had been, the thwarted lovers didn't really lie here, in the family graveyard. Well, not the part of them that mattered. Their souls were surely still laughing, chasing one another forever round the maze of little lanes around Weirwynd Wood. I ran with them, and with my own ghosts, and we were at peace.

Antbots

Antbots all over my workshop, in various stages of assembly. I'm drowning in antennae and mandibles. Endless repairs and custom jobs. People love their antbots like they love their pets. We've taken on three new technicians: Antonella, Anthony, and Anton.

Antonella's the most skilled. She grinds micro-lenses for an ant's mind. Photons: focused, diffracted, reflected through porous nanocarbon, a quantum computer interpreting it all. Antbots are uniquely identical – individuals focused upon contributing to the good of the colony, AKA us – their human overlords.

I watch Antonella at work and realise with a shock of inevitability that we're engineering our replacements.

Antbots will inherit the Earth.