

Runner up

Saving Grace

by India Whitehouse

"Do rose-hips have hips?" he asked jokingly as we rambled along the autumn hedgerows full of rose hips and blackberries. A mosaic of shades that I would try to manifest when mixing up my oil paints. I look at him, the wide grin covered in berry juice.

"Yes," I respond with a smirk at the absurd image of an hourglass figure rose of thorny hips.

"Do you think they have tiny hula hoops?" I ask, playing along. He chuckles, that wicked mischief so characteristic of my Charlie.

"Or...or a grass skirt!" He exclaims doing his own little dance.

"Or tiny hip flasks?" I speak. That one goes over his head. He's only six and probably doesn't have the same image I have, of an old barnacled sea captain with a hip flask like the stories my mother told me back in my homeland. That was before threats of war, before waves of unrest swept through and drove out most of what I knew - my life, my family, but not my Charlie.

"Rosehips are just the name of the buds" I say solemnly guiding him onwards.

We wander round fields, marvelling at the autumn colours - the whites, yellows, reds.

"Look at the colour of that red stem," I say, pointing to what I now know to be bunches of wine-coloured mulberries.

"They look like beads that have been strung up to look like a baby mobile," I muse, enchanted by the glass looking droplets. Charlie continued walking, stopping to examine a spider's web.

"Why would you give babies a phone?" he asked, absentmindedly. Not kidding this time.

We were on our way home: something I will never take for granted, it will never not be a miracle, not after the intense struggle it took to get us one, many months of waiting without progress. We could just see the russet brick of our chimney above the rising trees. It stood singularly steadfast, in amongst the thick Dorset landscape. A beacon of red. A soothing landmark to which we could always find our way back. I read a quote that said 'Lighthouses don't go running all over the land looking for boats to save, they just stand there shining.' Trust that which needs to come, will come to you, sometimes doing your best means standing still. I think of stillness now as I look down onto the soft inquisitive soul gathering handfuls of smoothed chestnut husks which he brings me, like an offering. Charlie takes my hand instinctively, as we did on the boat crossing. The sounds, the darkness, the fear at what life awaited us on the other side. For Charlie, too small to understand, he just cried at the viscosity of fear that permeated the air around him. How was I meant to explain what was going on? We just held our hands together tight.

It's been just me and Charlie for as long as I choose to remember. We play games, and he helps me make supper, the blissful aroma of the spice jars transporting me back to my mother's kitchen - a distant memory more like a dream. Charlie would play while I painted, he'd ask me what it was and I'd ask him what he saw. He'd always find some unforeseen insight that my adult brain had not consciously intended. Then I'd tuck him into bed and we'd create stories of creatures and fantasies with all the magic and wonder, at all that lives unseen.

We traipse up the last hill before our home, the woodland entrance looking into the clearing. It always feels to me as if it were a black hole, some cosmic force drawing you in. It seems exempt and untouched by autumn, still as densely green as ever. We do not enter, but stand and stare for a while, watching. We do not know it yet, but we are also waiting. Waiting for the sound to come. The sound of heavy hooves, the timbre of weight, a thundering blast, something approaching. We stand stock still, bracing ourselves, as we unwittingly come into the presence of a wild creature. A woodland majesty. It advances closer. Its stance, powerful and regal, observing us, head forward and masterful, cloaked in antlers, abstracted tree sculptures that crown its fur body. The stag was grand in every sense. Thick rustling fur cascading down its back legs to look like folded wings, and its eyes. Its eyes sung, of returning swallows, needing the cold of our climate to make them feel alive once more, high up above all sound of human destruction, untouched by war or worry. Those eyes contained the vivacity of life - whole sunrises, half-moons, minute pearls, pearls which Victor Hugo describes as, 'being found in the dark folds of life', or in this case the black hole of the woodland. Containing all there is to contain. A magnetic, hypnotic blur of life and death and wild and nature.

And then...it was gone. As fast and as dignified as it came. Leaving us breathless and drained by the great animal's compelling wildness. I was both disturbed and in awe. Charlie's face drenched with aliveness, the sheer power and perfection at what we had just witnessed, awoke something in him. Asking him to choose, and he chose it. It unlocked in him, a deep primeval hunger for the natural world. I think of it now like 'the prelude' poem by Wordsworth that relays, "With purpose of its own...strode after me". This beautiful creature seemed to know our story. To know us. Seemed to have its own agenda for meeting that day, and its eyes, I have never forgotten, could reach you and hound you. It saw all I could not face about my past, all my fears of what our lives might have been, tore down the walls of all I had blindly duct taped together and called a plan, and it did so in an instant. I felt shaken to my very core.

The days and nights after the encounter had us awash with new stories, tales of Stag protectors, guardians of the woods, woodland monsters who are not monsters at all. Each day we would stand at the entrance willing it to be there, but it does not come when summoned. In thunderstorms we'd take refuge in the leafy chasm at the entrance to the woods feeling cloaked and secure by our omniscient protector as we watched the rain pour down into the open fields. Late November, trails of ivory mushrooms or 'fairy rings' in the

woodland entrance mapped out its past footprints. And each day when Charlie was at school I would go there and paint, channelling the wise spirit of its eyes as I soaked my brushes in watercolour, acrylics and oils.

Charlie, always full of curiosity, tried to ask of me things that I wanted to but to which I could not give him answers, his imagination carried away and I felt out of my depth. In those moments I prayed to the stag, that my boy would not be lost beneath the waves of life, that he would be looked after where I could not reach him. Picturing the knowing eyes put me at ease. I gave it my fears and failings and, believe, it kept me whole and sane. All those years living in this new country, my second home, it has sustained us and taken care of my Charlie.

I am weaker in my old age; my knees and hips have crumbled but he manages to take me for short walks through the woodlands. We still go out picking berries on mild autumn days, remembering the same stories and scenes from long ago. He tells stories to other people's children now. He is a park ranger, doing guided botanical walks and talks in which he comes alive by sharing his love for the woodlands and folktales. He is part of the ecosystem, not a visitor or transitory spectator, but an avid participant. As much part of it as the trees itself.

He told me recently, he had read that "birds sing in the early mornings to let others know they are still alive, that they made it through the night."

"It is like," he said, "they are singing to say I am still here, I am alive! That's what you have done your whole life," he says, holding my thin paper fingers. "Through all your pain and hardships you have used your art to create beauty, acts of defiance to say - I am here. I am alive today."

I stare at him, tears rolling down my cheeks and I admire my boy, my Charlie, my greatest achievement. And I let myself breathe, resting in the comfort which his eyes portray. His eyes are the same brightness as the eyes we were drawn by into that woodland clearing long ago, eyes that were not of fear or of trauma. His eyes were Stag eyes. Bright, wise and wholly wild.