

SHE SITS IN MY SHADOW

An original short story by Anj Medhurst

I'm about halfway up the field when I feel the urge to lay down. I lower myself carefully down onto the frost-tipped grass in a clumsy manoeuvre, far from graceful, but she just waits for me to settle and then she lays down next to me. I look up from my newly prone position and see rosehips overhanging from the hedgerow, silhouetted against a sky that is all the January shades of grey and blue. The deep red berries are like droplets of blood, or splashes of red wine on a white linen tablecloth. I squeeze my eyes shut as tightly as I can and see their inversion, haloed with darting pinpricks of gold light.

I'm wearing a waterproof coat and knee-length boots, but I can feel the cold wet from the frosted grass seeping through the wool of my gloves and the back of my hat, into my hair. It's not uncomfortable, this tussocky mattress, and I let my shoulders relax and my hips sink lower into the grass. I can feel her breathing next to me. Short huffy exhalations. I picture her breath visible in the cold air. She's missed me, I can tell. She was quick to return once they'd gone.

It had been nice, spending time with them – quiet, not like the Christmases I remember from my childhood. I'd sat with Dad at the kitchen table with a cup of tea and a Co-op mince pie and we'd reminisced over the impromptu Christmas Eve house parties of the early seventies, when our suburban street was full of young families and the neighbours' children would run up and down the stairs, or huddle around the tree rattling presents, guessing what might be inside. There were chocolate coins for them to take home, as the parents

wished each other good luck getting them to sleep. Beth and I had been no exception, and 'Father Christmas' had a lengthy wait after the last few guests had shrugged coats onto shoulders, snuggled toddlers inside, to trot the few doors up or down the street in the chilly night air. Mum and Dad would be tired and already slightly hungover when they were finally able to fill the stockings by the gas fire. Honestly love, we were always just about ready to string you two up by the time you settled down, at least knowing half the street was going through the same thing was some consolation. He'd chuckled and thrown a look towards Mum who was pottering around at the worktop, never able to just sit and do nothing. I remember dear, they don't make Christmas like that anymore, do they? It's all got to be arranged weeks in advance, all be perfectly 'curated', no one even makes their own sausage rolls these days, do they? It's all fancy do-dahs from M&S and Prosecco with raspberries in. We'd watched a 'lost' episode of Morecambe & Wise, Mum offering to fetch cheese and biscuits and handing round a bowl of salted nuts. Would you like a Quality Street love? Dad guffawing at the almost inappropriate jokes.

On Boxing Day morning there'd been hugs and promises to phone when they got there, I wish you'd come with us love, I worry about you here on your own. Dad had slipped a cheque into my coat pocket after they'd packed their bags into the car. As they'd driven slowly away, up the overgrown pot-holed farm track, I'd waved, knowing Mum was already one-finger-texting on her ancient phone to let my sister know they were on their way and Dad would be re-tuning the radio to something with regular traffic updates so they could avoid the jams on the M25. I can picture their next few days perfectly in my mind's eye. They'll greet the children with hugs, Dad will pat Rob on the shoulder and ask who he fancies for Premier League champions this season. Mum will kiss Beth on the cheek and

apologise that she couldn't do more to help with the food, what with coming straight from me. There will be piles of presents for the girls, there will be noise, there will be mess, just as it should be. The girls will be especially attentive to their grandma, sitting on her lap, asking her to help dress their dolls. Dad will get involved in a convoluted board game, they will want to paint his face, and he will let them. Make me look like a lion he will say, or a superhero. The girls will giggle as he takes off his glasses and tells Beth it's fine, no let them, it's OK, it'll wash off.

She yawns and stretches next to me and then I sense her leaning over me. I open my eyes and look straight into hers. They are the perfect shade of hazel - almost amber - ringed with dark charcoal grey. The tip of her nose is almost touching mine and I laugh as she moves away and sits waiting for me to clamber back to my feet. We look across the field, she is alert and awake while I feel drowsy, squinting into the hazy low sun. We follow one of the many tracks that have been forged through the matted, overgrown grass. Some have a clear purpose, a path from one hedgerow to another, the quickest route to safety for a muntjac maybe. Others meander more casually, and I picture rabbits on a haphazard nocturnal mission, outmanoeuvring predators with their organised chaos. She has chosen one of the more obvious routes that leads almost back to the house. When it disappears into an overgrown tangle of blackthorn and bramble, we veer to the right and I swing my legs over the electric fence, while she chooses to duck under it.

My phone buzzes in my pocket and I fish it out. It's Beth; they're here! OMG you should see the plastic tat they've bought the girls. Wish me luck. She signs off with an upside-down face emoji and a glass of wine. It would have been nice to see them all but when I look across to

where she's standing by the front door, waiting for me to catch up, I feel the guilt of abandoning her for the past few days all over again and know I couldn't have left her for any longer. It's true that she doesn't rely on me, I've made sure of that but our relationship has become symbiotic; we support each other, provide comfort, companionship, solace. She'd appeared almost as soon as they'd driven away. Peering cautiously round the half-open door, sniffing the air, before sloping across the room and sitting next to me. I'd put the kettle on and pottered around, shared snippets of their visit with her. Dad looked well, I'd said, all things considered, and Mum's just the same as always, fussing over him, making endless cups of tea, and putting on her rubber gloves to do a little bit of washing up even though there's a dishwasher right there. It's a shock to the system though, all that mindless chit-chat, after so much silence. She catches my eye and I smile, we are glad to be back in our quiet routine.

It's a quiet routine that developed slowly. After Jacob eventually moved out my morning walk got earlier; I'd leave the house just before sunrise, walking up across the fields following the tree line, snug to the hedgerow when the wind was scything bitterly from the east, or pausing to sit a while on the ridge overlooking the valley when the morning sun was strong enough to warm the ground. I'd watch the cubs emerge when she returned soon after first light. They'd play in the long grass, the boisterous rough and tumble of siblings, watched over by her protective gaze. As the weeks passed they got used to my presence and, with her implicit permission, ventured closer. They grew quickly; transformed from clumsy pup-like bundles into lean creatures with sharp vulpine silhouettes – and then they were gone.

Jacob's leaving had been more gradual. The cracks slowly widening until it was impossible to ignore them, to carry on stepping over them. I just don't want to live here anymore, he'd finally admitted as we sat in strained silence after dinner one cold February evening. I know it's right for you, it's what you've always wanted, I can see how happy being here makes you, but I can't bear it. I thought it would be different, I didn't think I would be this lonely. I need people, I need traffic, I need to be able to pop out to a pub, or a café, or a bookshop. I need life around me, and you know what? I need anonymity. It's like living under a microscope – everyone constantly speculating about who we are, what we're doing here. I can't stand it.

It had poured out – a flood of words and feelings that had been festering, simmering, barely contained for months. I'd known, of course, that this wasn't really working for him, that he wasn't happy, but I'd pushed the knowledge away because I was *finally* happy. We could have joined committees, baked cakes, donated to the church book sales, smiled and made small talk, drunk lukewarm tea, made friends, but we didn't. We'd arrived when I was burned out, at my lowest ebb, and the first two years had been about recovery. And I had recovered, as I'd sunk into this landscape slowly, allowing it to seep gradually into me. While Jacob had worked, I'd walked the endless footpaths and tracks; at first with my head down, hands in pockets, earbuds in, music up loud. Until gradually I'd begun to look up, to stop and crouch over a wildflower, to listen to the sound of the wind in the reeds, to run my hands over the bark of the giant Oaks. Instead of using my phone to block out the world I'd downloaded apps to identify the flora and fauna, I'd read folklore and natural histories, and this place had become the foundation of my new existence. And then Jacob had asked me to choose. Did I love him more than I loved it here? When I couldn't answer he had made

the decision for me. If you need me more than you need this place, you'll come with me. I stayed. We were still in touch; the complicated tangle of ownership, money, and possessions slowly resolving. The occasional phone call but mostly carefully worded emails. Was I still 'OK'? Yes. Had I had the Rayburn serviced? What had he thought of the thing he'd been to see at the Almeida? How were Fiona and Brendan?

It was strange at first, seeing her without the cubs. Their sudden disappearance had unsettled me, and I'd instinctively imagined that they'd fallen foul of the local farmer's shotgun, but I'd learned that their vanishing was most likely just the natural way of things. She'd done her job; kept them safe, brought them food, passed her wisdom on to them until they didn't need anything more and they'd gone. Off to secure their own territory, forge their own paths. They'd be somewhere close by so maybe I'd see them, or at least the pungent, cherry-stone-filled evidence of them on the tracks and bridleways I still walked daily.

She hadn't seemed bothered by their sudden departure, her routine unchanged. Still sloping back across the field just after first light and sitting close by, watching me, nose twitching but relaxed, her tail curled gently around her paws. Then, one warm late-summer morning I'd lain back in the long, sweet grass, closed my eyes, and with the sun warm on my face and the buzz of crickets in my ears, I'd drifted drowsily away. When I woke some minutes later, lifting my head and shading my eyes from the bright sun, she'd been there. Curled up in my shadow, just inches from my side, her jaw resting on the soft sweep of her tail, eyes closed but ears pricked. I'd frozen, breath held, head slightly raised, and watched her. She stirred almost immediately, stretching gracefully as she rose, and with a quick glance over her

shoulder, she'd lolloped away into the tangle of bracken and brambles that sheltered her den.

And so, our relationship developed quietly, without words. She sat with me, walked with me, waited for me, came to greet me. The first time I spoke to her she froze, hackles raised, then turned and sloped away. I hadn't been one of those humans; the ones that walk the paths with their chatter, noisy children and barking dogs, or worse, with their heavy boots and guns. She eventually accepted my voice though, and our one-sided conversations began; I'd share my observations, my plans, and she would pause and make eye contact before returning to her quiet repose or wandering ahead again having, I imagined, given my thoughts due consideration.

I pour myself a glass of wine, cut a small piece from the slab of Christmas cake that mum had left, wrapped in cling-film and tinfoil, and take them through to the sitting room. It took her a few days to get used to the tree with its tinsel and lights, the familiar scent and earthiness out of place in the corner of the room but then I'd found her curled up beneath it, amongst the fallen needles, and moved her bed there. And so, she lay, her russet-red fur alive in the twinkling lights, the black tip of her nose resting on the purple velvet throw that I hadn't been able to resist adding to her basket.

I take a sip of wine and break off a corner from the slice of cake. Growing up, urban foxes had visited our garden and Mum, always a soft touch for an animal she perceived to be in need, had started putting scraps out for them. Bacon rind and chicken skin had led to a regular arrangement with the local butcher who would add the scrag end of something for 'her' foxes to the parcel of sausages and lamb chops.

She stirs, stretching her slender paws, flexing the sharp claws, and relaxes further into her bed. I sit, watching her ribs rise and fall gently as she sleeps, I sip my wine and eat my cake and wonder what Jacob, and mum and dad, and Beth would say if they could see us. My phone buzzes in my pocket and she lifts her head, disturbed by the sudden noise. I look at the screen; Just checking in love. All OK here (chaos of course!) Thinking of you on your own, hope you're not feeling too lonely. Speak soon.

No mum, I'm not feeling lonely at all.

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