

meadowyarn

the light inside

a #yarnfictions novella

by Anj Medhurst

part five : gabrielle diot/walk

Gabrielle Diot

He gazes at her, studying the soft lines around her left eye; the gentle, inquisitive arch of her brow, the way the light picks out her cheekbone, the wisps of chestnut hair below her delicately-lobed ear. He'd walked across Central Park after the meeting at the gallery, where Rosenberg had asked – begged – him to make sure she was safe. He had entrusted him with her future on his return to London and now here he was; here she was.

Rosenberg furnished Owen with documents; proof of ownership, provenance. He was worried; he'd shipped various artworks to England as the Nazis had closed in on Paris, imagined that they'd be safe there but he wasn't so sure now. The news from London was bad. The war was escalating. He needed to know that his collection was safe. He needed to know that the Degas canvas, the *Portrait of Gabrielle Diot*, was safe.

Owen entered the park deep in thought, contemplating the task ahead, he lit a cigarette and watched the smoke rise as he strolled beneath the dense canopy, in awe of the arching branches, intrigued by the exotic specimens, energised by the opportunity that had unexpectedly arisen. This was his chance to play a part, to prove himself, to be something back in London, finally. He looked down at his feet, at the patchwork of leaves, husks, cones and seed cases and he filled his waistcoat pocket with as many different kernels as he could find. He loved trees, he loved the permanence of them, the regeneration of them, that they worked so hard and required so little in return. He loved to sketch them, to study the leaf forms, the striations of the bark. He would take them, the energy of them, the promise, back to London with him.

When it was time to leave, he tipped the contents of his pocket into a small brown envelope and licked the flap shut before sequestering the package into his luggage. There the seeds had stayed, quiet in their brown paper sarcophagus, dormant, waiting.

A few weeks later, he retrieved the canvas from a shell-shocked gallery proprietor after another night of bombing raids. Oxford Street had been nigh-on obliterated and she'd spent the night cowering in the cellar of the Bond Street gallery surrounded by the canvases she had hurriedly removed from the walls. She barely glanced at his letter of introduction before handing over a loosely wrapped rectangular form and he made his way back to his north London terrace not quite able to believe what he was carrying. Standing in his kitchen he removed the makeshift brown paper from the picture to reveal a canvas of not more than 24 inches in height, framed with simple, white, un-ornamented wood. *The Portrait of Gabrielle Diot*, her name inscribed in the top right corner, above the familiar signature of Edgar Degas.

That afternoon he constructed an improvised packing case for her, wrapping the canvas in brown paper and sackcloth before securing simple wooden slats around her with jute twine. She spent the next few weeks under the stairs, as safe as he could keep her. Until he couldn't any longer.

She is propped on the mantel now, resting against the chimney breast, where she has been since he arrived here. He had intended to wrap her back up again, once he'd checked she was unscathed, to keep her under wraps, protected, but he can't bring himself to do it. He'd cut the twine, removed the wood and carefully extricated the canvas from its layers of oilcloth and paper, before lifting her up to the light and resting her on the only suitable surface in the room. She met his gaze, seemed grateful for her release and her beauty overwhelmed him.

He will need to light the fire in the grate soon, the air is cold first thing in the morning and the evenings are drawing in. She will need to be moved away from the smoke and dust and soot but he isn't sure where he will put her. He isn't sure he can bear the smoke and the dust and the soot, maybe he will suffer the cold and leave her where she is. He is used to

meeting her eye as he moves around the room, catching a glimpse of her soft, pastel, plaid dress as he glimpses her through the open living room door on his way to the kitchen first thing in the morning. Her expression intrigues him; quizzical, a little bit aloof, and yet vulnerable all at once. He knows nothing of her, but she captivates him. He sits in the chair by the fireplace each evening and opens his book but his eyes are drawn to her face and he finds himself sitting in the dark, hours later, lost in thought.

Walk

‘Hup, boy’

Scout lifts his nose from its zig-zag path through the tufty grass at the edge of the track and trots to my heel. He has something in his mouth; a bone. He often finds old bones, white and worn smooth; rabbit or fox I assume, or badger, maybe?

‘Dead.’ I practice my firm, command voice and he drops the treasure reluctantly. I slip the lead over his head, then lift the latch on the metal gate that separates the grazing marshland from the woods. I love this small irregular patch of woodland and was surprised when I learned that it had been planted within the last twenty years. A tangle of hazel, silver birch, cherry and ash, we must duck and weave our way through trailing ivy and step over fallen branches. As we wander through it, on our way to the local shop I test myself, identifying the trees I’ve learned to recognise since I’ve been here. Used only to the London planes and lime trees that sparsely lined the pavements of north London, I am acquiring knowledge all the time. Still, some elude me; is it ash or alder with the clusters of tiny brown cone-like fruit?

The clang as the gate latch closes, a harsh rattle echoing through the tubular steel, is one of the sounds I think must mark the way the marsh has changed. These gateways onto the

marshland are evidence of the way it is managed, its identity. It is at once natural, wild and yet carefully contained. Alan, the local farmer, bemoans the wildlife trust who install gates, cut paths, clip hedges, dredge ditches but never quite how he would. He is nostalgic for the marsh of his childhood when it was bounded by barbed wire fences and decrepit stiles, when the neighbouring landowners argued over grazing rights and family feuds meant fences were left untended out of spite, or maybe just exhaustion. There were no clanging, self-closing, steel gates when Alan was a boy. As an incomer, and a city dweller, I rather like the ease with which I can traverse the land. I appreciate that I can phone a warden to report an overgrown path or a damaged fence, but I already avoid conversations with Alan about the Wildlife Trust, the government, the EU, the gentrification of the local pub, foreigners, and myriad other subjects. Stick to the weather – which is also never right – admire his cattle and ask after his children, all now off at university and destined not to follow in his footsteps.

We muddle our way along the path, Scout and I, and I encourage him not to yank the lead. Dog training is a work-in-progress and I mutter his name and ‘heel’ repeatedly as he strains towards one tempting smell after another. Dark fox dirt, full of cherry stones, is especially enticing and I know if I loosen my hold on the lead I will have a stinking, yet shameless, dog to hose down when we get home.

As we emerge onto the lane at the other side of the woods I notice that there is a police car parked outside the village hall. The decline of police ‘on the beat’ is a regular news story here but I find the fact that the local bobby appears to have time to share a cup of tea with an elderly resident reassuring. Not long after I’d moved into the cottage, I’d turned this corner and seen blue and white police tape across the road; residents and regional news reporters hovering; police forensic vans parked up on the verge. The news emerges over the following days that a missing teenage girl, variously believed to have eloped/been kidnapped/run away to London/drowned in the estuary on her way home from a party has, in fact, died while

hidden in her back garden; a result of too much vodka, a rogue ecstasy tab and a cold night locked out of her parents' house. I am thankful that it is no longer my job to weigh and record the details of her internal organs, to picture the family hunched and waiting, wondering what they might have done differently.

I loop Scout's lead over the fence rail while I buy a pint of milk and packet of biscuits from the village shop. Situated next to a campsite, the shelves are stocked with an eclectic selection of camping staples, holiday wares, and a perfunctory range of bread, cakes and wine. Campsite clientele and locals alike assumed to require nothing more sophisticated than a box of Mr Kipling's Cherry Bakewells or a Cornetto.

We continue our walk, completing an irregular circle as we tramp back across the southern end of the marsh, I let Scout off his lead again and he bounds ahead. He is in his element among the dykes and ditches that criss-cross this land, and he splashes in and out of the muddy water, chasing dragonflies and flushing birds from the rushes. We regularly spot buzzards, marsh harriers and herons, and in the evening we are often treated to the sight of a barn owl hunting low and silent along the field margins. I recently picked up what I thought was an owl pellet recently, planning to dissect it, only to have Bernie hoot when I showed her and tell me that I was about to pull apart petrified fox poo.

We are nearing the gate that leads to Bernie's house and Scout bounds expectantly through a gap in the hedge. I hear her greet him enthusiastically, asking him how his walk has been and is he alone or has he got me with him? I call as I push against the wooden gate and see Scout at Bernie's feet, on his back, having his filthy tummy scratched.

'Hello Bernie, sorry about that! Scout, here, come on boy. We won't disturb you unless you'd like us to? I have got a packet of Hobnobs...'

'Helen, come on in, I was about to put the kettle on. Please, stay and have a cup of tea with me.' Bernie attempts to brush clay residue from her hands, succeeds only in transferring

it to her apron, and takes the biscuit packet I proffer. She heads into her cool dark kitchen and I hear the rush of water into the kettle, the clink of earthenware. Her house is one of the oldest in the area and has low ceilings and dark oak beams. She's lived here for most of her life, although not all. As we've got to know each other I've gleaned that her father bought the old farmhouse after the war when she was six or seven, and although she's been married, had children, been widowed, she is somehow here all these years later.

She brings two mugs of tea and I sniff it, discerning the delicate aroma of bergamot. We stand on her worn back doorstep and look out at the huge trees that surround her house. I was treated to a guided tour of her amazing wooded garden when we first became friends and she'd told me a little bit about the trees. Among the poplars and birches are sequoias, tulip trees, hickories and an enormous ailanthus, or 'tree of heaven'. They were planted, Bernie thought, in the 1940s by the previous owner of the farmhouse. He was an art dealer, a well-travelled one by all accounts, and had grown the trees from seed brought back from his trips to the US. He moved here from London during the blitz bringing his art collection with him for safekeeping, rumour had it. No one was sure quite what happened, but he disappeared during a storm towards the end of the war and the house lay empty, decaying, for several years before eventually the estate was put up for sale. What happened to the art dealer, no one is sure but stories that he fled with his valuable works of art, fearing a Nazi invasion, still got locals offering theories and hearsay. I mention him to Alan during one of our passing conversations on the marsh and he is quite adamant.

'Black Shuck got him en't it.'

'Black Shuck?' I'd queried.

'Yep, the black dog, the beast, the shuck. You got off and look it up on that internet, you'll see what I mean.' He'd chuckled and waved goodbye as he walked off, his gait uneven, whistling his spaniel away from a raucous game with Scout.

Bernie and I stand and sip our tea, looking at the trees, discussing the merits of regularly picking sweet peas. She gives me some runner beans to take home, she has a glut she says, is giving them to anyone who'll have them. The tea drunk, Scout pulls his nose reluctantly out of a molehill and we say our goodbyes, thank Bernie for the tea and the beans and wander home.

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