

meadowyarn

the light inside

a #yarnfictions novella

by Anj Medhurst

part nine : burial/flood

Burial

He sits, leaning against the uneven flint wall of the cowshed, hugging his bent knees to his chest to quell the shaking. He knows what he must do. His head is buzzing; it feels like the vibrations from the relentless overnight planes have lodged in his nerve-endings and he will never not be able to feel them. He squints and peers across the meadow at the hazy morning sunshine reflecting off the dew-laden grass, shimmering like smoke. He can smell it.

She is propped up against the wall next to him. Clothed in her paper and sackcloth and wooden slats, tied with twine again. She is quiet. He has explained what he is going to do, why he must do it but she met his gaze, silently; hurt, betrayed. He pushes himself up to his feet, he must get on with it. He isn't sure how long he has been sitting, back pressed against the cold wall, but his joints are stiff, unresponsive and he limps, hunched, towards the wooden door.

The tools he used to plant the saplings are leaning just inside. He has barely looked at the trees for weeks. He imagines the plants he'd cultivated so carefully are now choked with weeds, suffocating. He has barely left the house, aside from hurried sojourns to the village store, where he has caught up with news from overheard snippets and newspaper headlines. The German sorties on the industrial midlands have escalated. That is how they have found him; he is directly under their flight path, and so is she. This morning the villagers were in shock. A direct hit on the train station in the market town less than five miles from the village had killed the station master and his wife, the platform destroyed. It was intended for him, he was sure; they were close, so close.

He picks up the shovel that he last used to dig the holes for the tree saplings. Then, he was filled with optimism, imagining the trees growing, imagining a future for them. Now he can envisage nothing but the destruction of the trees – of her. He presses the nose of the

shovel into the beaten earth floor. It is hard, the earth compacted from years of cattle hooves. Scraping, levering and lifting, he uses the weight of the shovel to break up the solid pan and slowly the hole grows. As he digs in the dark corner of the cowshed he tries not to think of the hole as a grave. This will not be her end, her final resting place; he is keeping her safe, rescuing her. Even if they come for him they will not find her. And when the war is over, when the danger has passed, he will unearth her.

When the hole is almost a foot in depth he uses his fork and trowel to level the base and sides. It is dark in the shed but his eyes have become accustomed to the gloom and he can make out rusted iron rings fixed into the flint walls. He imagines cattle, tethered for milking, flanks steaming, the smell of warm cream and sweet straw mingling. Now the shed feels like a dungeon, an ending place, not a beginning. Kneeling at the edge of the rectangular void, he uses some of the hay that has collected in the corners of the shed, greyed with age now, to cover the bottom, then lays hessian sacking on top of that. He will do what he can to keep her dry and protected in her hiding place. Once the chamber is ready he staggers, ungainly, to his feet. His ankles and knees are numb and his back has set crooked, shoulders hunched, tense. He stumbles across the shed and out through the open door, to where he has left her leaning up against the wall. He hasn't wanted her to see what he is doing but it has taken much longer to dig the hole than he'd anticipated and he can sense that she is unnerved. He slumps onto the damp ground next to her and rests his wrists on his bent knees. His hands are red raw, blisters seep across his palms and angry weals criss-cross his fingers where he has gripped the wooden tool handles. He wipes the back of his hand across his forehead and feels coarse dust mix with sweat. When he looked in the bathroom mirror that morning he barely recognised himself, the endless sleepless nights and constant worry have left him pallid, red-eyed, gaunt.

In the shed he was oblivious to the change outside but looking up now he sees that the

early morning hazy sunshine has been smothered, the sky filled in with grey. He watches as a heavy, purplish ridge of cloud edges closer to the farmhouse and feels a stiff breeze picking up across the meadow. The straggly hedgerow of elder and hawthorn arches under the strength of it. Preceded by an almost imperceptible flash, the first rumble of thunder rolls towards him. He moves quickly, his aching limbs and lacerations momentarily forgotten. Lifting her carefully using the wooden slatted case, he moves back into the cowshed just as the first drops of rain hit the dusty ground next to him. Sitting on the floor he rests the bottom edge of the flat rectangle carefully down and holds it in front of him. Through the layers of paper and cloth and wood, he can picture her face as clear as when she sat on the mantel. Her features are etched on his memory. He will never forget her. As another flash illuminates the shed and a deep growl of thunder fizzles in the air, against all his will and wisdom, he lowers her gently into the prepared hole. Before he can change his mind, he covers her with more hessian sackcloth and then, with cupped hands lifts the soft earth from the spoil heap and starts to cover her. When he can no longer see the sackcloth he uses the flat edge of the small metal trowel to push the rest of the earth into the hole, pressing gently down on it with the flat of his free hand as he works, smoothing it as the hole fills close to floor level. Trying not to picture her entombed beneath the dark earth he stands carefully on the rectangle of freshly replaced floor, pressing down with the soles of his boots, inching across, tamping the soil, firming it. A huge crackle of electricity rips through the air and the ground beneath his feet shakes with the force of the strike. He leaps instinctively off the freshly firmed patch of earth. Has he done this? Has he brought this wrath upon them? Maybe she has.

He staggers to the open shed door, the aperture letting in scant enough light to see now, and pulls it closed, struggling against the strength of the wind. Forcing the rusted iron bolt into its housing he slumps against it, spent. The storm shows no sign of relenting; the air crackles continuously and the ground shakes beneath him with each lightning strike. The rain

is torrential, beating down on the tiled roof, pounding into the ground outside the shed. He cowers as another lightning strike rips through the sky, charging everything with electricity until he is sure he can feel it in his veins. The storm is in him, consuming him. It roars at him, screams its displeasure at what he has done. How could he have thought that this was the answer? To run, to hide, to pretend he can keep her safe.

An immense gust of wind forces the bolt out of its housing and the door is sucked open, slamming back against the flint wall then swinging back towards him. The force of it hitting his side as he crouches on all fours knocks him sideways and he lays, spread-eagled, his mouth full of dirt. As he crawls to the opening, the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. Beyond the door he can see something moving, dark and poised to leap, an enormous black beast, eyes glowing red, aflame. Adrenalin carries him, floundering, out of the door and away, as the landscape is briefly illuminated by another flash of light. Glancing over his shoulder he can see smoke rising and smell scorched earth and wood. He sucks in lungfuls of fizzing air and it propels him along the narrow path towards the marsh. Water runs into his boots, soaking his feet, pours off his head and shoulders, drags on his clothes, plasters his shirt to him, renders his trousers heavy and cumbersome. He pauses, gasping, to get his bearings, hanging on to a fence post as his feet lose their grip beneath the rising water, and he slides, grasping, grabbing at the air, so thick with rain and wind and tension but it slips through his fingers, and as he flails, sinking, he pictures her face, her bewitching expression, her beauty, until nothing is left.

Flood

I sense the water long before I feel it. The vibrations shiver through me, like someone walking over my grave, isn't that what they say? as the sea gradually encroaches. The wind

whips the spume into a frenzy as the tide rises inch by inch, minute by minute. The energy from the suck and pull of the undertow leeches through the mud and snaps in the air, as the huge waves force the water up the estuary. I can smell it getting closer. Eventually salt meets freshwater in a brackish melee, a duel neither can win. Then I taste it; pungent and putrid, it assaults me, seeping into my depths and altering my balance; upsetting my equilibrium. All around me, and in me, things are changing; roots choke on unfamiliar minerals, creatures sniff at the alien air, frantically grooming brined fur.

There is no moon. The wind tugs at the rushes and sedge like bony fingers wrenching out handfuls of hair. Rain lashes out of the pitch sky, piercing me like shards of silvered glass, gathering in streams and rivulets, seeking out the cracks in me. It forces rats and rabbits screaming from their runs and burrows, catching the weak unaware, filling tiny lungs as claws scabble, futile against the liquefying earth. I feel him as he stumbles along the sodden track. His boots choked with mud, he is gasping as the wind whips his rain-slicked cheeks. The creatures that have been here before, the ones that understand, are fleeing or hiding and yet here he is.

Strange things happen when the waters rise. Ditches and paths merge seamlessly, rabbit holes and fence posts lie in wait. The rising water keeps secrets. I sense him stop, hear him panting as he pauses. He looks back, trying to make something out in the darkness. He is running from something, I can feel his terror, the fear driving him on. I am powerless, transfixed by the water as it rises. There is nothing I can do to resist it, nothing I can do to help.

He moves again, blindly forward into the black, into the rising water, into the clawing, sucking mud. The rushes and reeds that mark the drainage channel are bent by the wind and as he loses his footing, as he starts to slide into the oily, dark water, he grabs at twisted stems and roots, trying to pull himself back up the earth bank to solid ground. But this channel, dug

and re-dug by centuries of farm hands, to coerce and control me into placid grazing land, is losing its battle against the flood. As he scrabbles against slipping earth, barbed wire snakes its way around his leg, clawing at his britches. His feet slip into my soft bank; his hands slide off the reeds and as the years and layers of silt and mud and roots and peat shift and move I feel him sinking into me. I can make space for this struggling, retching, gasping creature. My silt is deep and welcoming, it has been the end place for cattle and horses, for cart wheels and wagons, it has room for more. I feel his weight, his mass displacing clay and sand and stone as he finds his resting place.

After the storm, I am transformed. There is an unnatural quiet, a different kind of silence, missing the chatter of the animals and birds that are still hidden, waiting for the water to recede. And it will, although this change seems irrevocable, this landscape is temporary and it won't be long before I settle back into a familiar guise. The stranger will remain. He is part of me now but his passage isn't over, he is slowly sinking deeper, diminishing, merging, decomposing, as we negotiate, me and him, what of him will become me and what will remain.

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