

meadowyarn

**the light inside**

a #yarnfictions novella

by Anj Medhurst

part six : trees/deep

## Trees

He pushes each brown, shiny seed into a small terracotta pot, filled with peaty soil, and positions them on window ledges all over the cottage. Tending to them; watering them, watching the shoots first disturb the surface of the soil, then each unfurls two perfect seed leaves, he turns them toward the light. The tiny seedlings, fresh and keen, are filled with possibility, with potential; to exist for decades, maybe even centuries, to persist through this madness and terror. To steadily and with little care or fuss, grow and outlive it all.

He has gradually acquired the tools required to clear the ground behind the cottage. A sturdy pair of boots, wool serge trousers. He caught the bus to the local market town and purchased a scythe, a shovel, a small trowel; he is acclimatising to his new life, assimilating. As he clears brambles and nettles, bindweed and sedge, he reveals the soft, rich earth beneath, untouched he imagines, for generations. He wonders if this land has ever been tended, maybe it had once been a productive kitchen garden, left to fall into disrepair with a change of tenant – or landlord. He has a plan for this rough scrubby corner of the marsh. It is tucked away behind the house and fenced off from grazing animals. He imagines the ditches and streams that partition this patch of land as if they are the paths in Central Park, pictures the majestic canopy of the arboretum that he will plant, that will outlive him, outlive the madness.

The seedlings that he nurtured on his window sills have been outside in his sheltered backyard for weeks. Staked and weeded and watered and fed with pungent comfrey manure he has been vigilant, watching for deer and rabbits, constructing a makeshift cage of canes and net to protect their tender stems. As the whips start to branch and bud, he refers to his New York sketchbook, to the notes he made walking the paths of the park collecting the seeds. Gradually he puts names to his mystery seedlings; whittles long, flat labels from hazel

poles and pencils in his best guess at each one. He had no idea where he would plant them when he tucked that envelope of seeds into his trunk and boarded the ship back to England but now these saplings are keeping alive the memory of everything he had left behind.

He kneels and scrapes back the topsoil, feels the damp earth wedged behind each fingernail, sees the dark peat stain his fingers. His knees are damp as the moisture in the soil leeches through the fabric of his trousers. A robin perches nearby, head tipped inquisitively, waiting to see what he will unearth. He pulls a small beetle grub from beneath the soil and flicks it towards the bird. It hesitates and then hops down to collect the creamy coloured cocoon. He senses it nod its thanks to him before retreating to enjoy the impromptu meal. As the months pass he is finding his feet in this quiet, alien place. The smoke and dust and stench of London is diminishing, only occasionally catching him unawares. He listens to his wireless less, he glances at the newspaper if he comes across it in the village but he feels far removed from the falling bombs and rubble-strewn streets of the capital.

He digs a deep hole for each of the young trees, removing the soft, rich soil with a small trowel, sprinkling bone meal into each hollow, placing the root ball in the centre, having carefully teased out a few roots from the mass. After back-filling the hole with topsoil he mulches the surface with compost and using his heel, gently firms a circle around the tender young trunk. As he prepares a hole for a sturdy red oak sapling, he uncovers a small bone. Removing earth from the bottom of the hole his trowel scrapes against another. Not far beneath the surface but far enough, he thinks, that whatever it is has been buried intentionally rather than simply lay there. He reaches for his shovel and removes a larger clod of damp soil; more bones. He gradually reveals what seems to be the skeleton of a mammal of some kind. He recognises ribs, what looks to be a tibia or fibula, probably a foot in length, and several vertebrae that are still articulated. He is intrigued by the find. Is it a sheep? A calf maybe, he doesn't think it is big enough to be a fully-grown cow. Possibly a dog; he imagines

a beloved family pet, or a working hound, it's big for a dog though he thinks, very big. He imagines the marsh is full of bones. The remains of lives lived and lost. A charnel house, all around him and beneath him.

He turns his attention back to the sapling in the pot by his feet. As he plants the last of the young trees, he pictures bridges crossing the streams, paths shaded by the canopy and soft leaf mulch underfoot. He has wrapped the tender young trunks with hopsacks rubbed with soap, to deter the deer and rabbits and he will take care to keep the earth around each sapling weed free.

When he is done, he cleans his tools, stacks the empty terracotta pots in the yard and leaves his muddy boots on the back step. He scrubs his hands at the kitchen sink, while the kettle boils on the range and then carries his teacup and saucer through to the sitting room. Sitting in the chair by the mantel, he tells her of his endeavours but she is uninterested, looking back at him, unmoved. He doubts she has ever seen the wonder of the trees in Central Park but maybe she walked along the banks of the Seine or in the Jardin des Tuileries. He has positioned the chair so that she is looking directly at him and as he sips the bitter brew he imagines her life in Paris. Once the war is over, he will find out more about her but until then, they will share this room and he will tend his trees and wait.

## Deep

The boy pushes the long bamboo cane straight down into me. Probing, pushing through my soft, silty, mud; my ochre, tarry, sludge – to see how far it will go. It won't reach far into my hidden depths. It scuffs against obstacles as it delves; jabbing, jarring, shifting relics and bones that have lain silent for longer than the boy has existed. He pulls the stick out and

shouts to someone. Look, how deep it is, deeper than me. Look. A reply tells him to be careful, keep away from the edge. Not to get mud on his trousers. Imagine what would happen if you fell in there. A different voice now; jovial. It'd be right up over the top of you; you'd sink, disappear in no time. I'd get extra chips for tea. The boy laughs a nervous laugh. He imagines being covered in thick glutinous slime; it filling his pockets and then his mouth, his nose, his ears. He thinks about what it would feel like to be completely submerged. He wouldn't be able to breathe. Would he be able to swim back to the top? Yes, he would. He'd swim up and his dad would haul him out and his mum would shout about his trousers and he would know what was underneath, how deep it was. He pushes the cane down again. Down as far as he can reach. Deep.

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