

meadowyarn

**the light inside**

a #yarnfictions novella

by Anj Medhurst

part ten : rescue/inside

## Rescue

The noise is unnatural, unworldly. I wonder at first if it is a piece of farm machinery being dragged across a yard somewhere, or a wild animal that I haven't yet familiarised myself with. I remember, not long after moving in, hearing a muntjac deer barking late one night and the hairs on my arms standing on end as I wondered what was being murdered – albeit slowly and rhythmically – in my back garden.

There it is again – a screeching, bellowing wail. It isn't farm machinery and Scout's ears are pricked, his interest piqued. I had thought, when I moved here that the countryside would be quiet. It isn't. While I am no longer under a Heathrow flight path and there is hardly any traffic, it is far removed from the notion of rural peace and tranquillity that I had previously entertained. As I sit on the back step, with a cup of tea and a piece of toast, I can hear a cacophony of birdsong. As well as the melodic finches and tits, there are harsh calls from jays, rooks and pheasants and I can hear a cockerel crowing sporadically in the distance. The wood pigeons swoop across the meadow practising their bizarre wing-clapping ritual, the wind in the trees is noisier than I'd have believed possible, and now and then a once startling but now commonplace double bang from a shotgun punctuates the orchestration.

I stand, slip my bare feet into the boots that are permanently by the back door, and wander over to the garden gate to investigate the source of the strange noise. A rough vehicle track runs past my house and down to another pair of Victorian farm-labourers' cottages before giving way to a footpath and a stile that leads on to the marsh. Scout is already squeezing under the fence adjacent to the wooden step when I reach it. Looking out across the open marshland I can see a loose huddle of cattle next to the concrete bridge that spans the main drainage ditch. They look agitated and I stand still, calling Scout to my side. The cattle are on the marsh all summer before the water levels rise and the mud becomes too

troublesome for them, and walking the dog while they are there presents the occasional challenge. I am not confident enough to walk through them and hearsay from other dog-walkers has confirmed my instinctive caution. While they are gentle, inquisitive creatures in the main, these are mostly young males that can be quite skittish, especially around excitable dogs. I was told there had been an awful incident not too far from here some years back when a dog walker had tried to intervene as cattle surrounded her terrier and she'd been trampled to death. It's not advisable to place yourself in the path of a group of animals each weighing several tonnes, even if their intentions are usually peaceful. Bernie had told me that she'd witnessed a group of young cattle kill a fox cub the previous summer, taking turns to throw it into the air with their hooves while the others pawed the ground, snorting. The combination of youthful bravado and testosterone leading inevitably to violence, not just a human trait, it would seem.

I peer across to the huddle of cattle as the plaintive bellow echoes across the marsh again. It is a cow making at least part of the noise. The group jostle each other and splinter a little so I can see through them to something at the edge of the ditch, something colourful on the ditch bank. I hope it isn't another one of Alan's cows trapped in the ditch. As I stand, wondering what to do, loath to venture across to the cattle alone, I hear a diesel engine and squeaking suspension behind me. Looking over my shoulder I see Alan's ancient pick-up truck bouncing down the rough track towards the gate.

'Can you see what's up with them?' He is leaning out of the driver's window as he turns down the embankment to where a wide metal farm gate gives him access to the marsh. He jumps out and fiddles with his key in the lock, another result of the wildlife trust management that he has bemoaned on several occasions.

'No, sorry,' I reply. 'They don't sound very happy though do they. It looks like there's something over there, at the edge of the ditch.'

‘Better go and have a look. Jean at the shop phoned me, said she could hear them all night and had I been over this morning. Jump in – Scout can stay in the cab, you might be useful, you never know.’ His wry glance suggests he’s not sure under what circumstances I might be useful but I get into the truck anyway.

We bump across the tussocky grass, me holding Scout on a short lead between my legs as we near the huddle of animals and they part and amble towards us. I’ve watched them approach Alan when he arrives before and while it’s not quite the exuberant greeting I get from Scout, they recognise and acknowledge him. I guess he might have food, their motives are surely not that dissimilar to Scout’s.

Alan has turned off the engine and jumped down from the cab. He is walking across towards the ditch bank where the mud has been churned into a thick soup by the agitated cattle.

‘Good God!’ I hear him shout and he starts to jog, looking over his shoulder at me in the cab. ‘Quick. It’s Bernie, she’s in the ditch.’

‘Scout, you stay here.’ I give him a stern look and slam the cab door behind me, breaking into a run and wishing I’d put socks on as my feet slide around inside my boots. The cows back away as I lurch, faltering, towards them and I can see as they move, that the shape I’d been able to make out on the bank of the ditch is indeed Bernie. Thankfully she is moving, waving limply as Alan reaches her.

‘What the devil... Bernie, what happened? What on earth...’ He kneels at the edge of the ditch as I reach them, short of breath.

She speaks faintly but a smile glimmers across her lips. ‘I lost track of time– no torch– trying not to spook the cattle. I slipped, too steep. I couldn’t get out. Daft...’ She laughs weakly, her eyes close. She is submerged up to her waist in the oily, peat-stained water, thick ochre mud cakes her arms.

I crouch next to her. ‘Oh, Bernie, how long have you been here? We need to get you out, you must be frozen. Are you hurt?’ It’s a warm early autumn morning but the water must be very cold and Bernie, while not exactly frail, is not built for this kind of endurance.

‘All night– I think...’ She shivers and her eyes close again.

‘All night! Alan, we need to get her out, quickly.’ I wedge my feet into the muddy bank, searching out nooks for my boots amongst the tangle of roots that mesh the bank. Alan does the same on the other side of her and between us, we try to haul Bernie out, our forearms looped under her armpits. Her legs are deep in the soft silty mud and it isn’t easy. I imagine it is like quicksand and picture her being sucked deeper and deeper into it as she’d sought to gain purchase in the dark. Eventually, inch by inch we pull her up the bank until she is clear of the water. I strip off my jumper and wrap it around her shoulders while Alan phones for an ambulance.

Once he’s given details and directions he re-dials. ‘Hi love, there’s been a rum old do, down on the marsh. I need you to bring blankets, quick as you can, and if there’s tea in the pot stick it in a flask with lots of sugar. Quick love, it’s Bernie, she’s been in the ditch all night. We’re waiting for the paramedic but you know what it’s like getting down here, it’ll be a while.’ He puts his phone back in his pocket and I watch him scour the herd, the younger cattle are a little unsettled, excitable. As he moves amongst them they snort and nuzzle each other, reluctant to move away from the ditch.

I am kneeling next to Bernie, holding her hand, stroking it gently as she lays, eyes closed.

‘There’s an ambulance on the way Bernie.’

‘An ambulance? I’m not sure... do I need...? The cows. They all stayed with me all night, comforting, calling until you came. It was strange, the mud felt warm, like a cocoon almost. I must have been dreaming; I saw the flood, and Black Shuck, and Owen, the art dealer, and there’s a painting, Gabrielle, it’s under– it’s beneath– under the...’ Her voice

fades and her eyes close again.

The gate clangs and I see Becky, Alan's wife, jogging towards us with blankets and a flask, in the distance I can hear a siren. The cows have settled down now and Alan is corralling them, moving them away from us and they jostle and grab mouthfuls of grass and make low comforting sounds as they move. I squeeze Bernie's hand and she smiles.

## **Inside**

Sometimes there is no warning. Sometimes change occurs when I am least expecting it. A sudden disturbance unsettles me, kicks up dust, churns up mud, and I wait, anticipating the arrival. It is dark when she arrives. I recognise her soft tread, her calm voice. She knows me, she has seen me in many of my guises and she should know better, but she is unable to resist.

Soon, I can feel the panic in the air as she loses her grip on my soft, slippery sides and as she fights to gain purchase the water muddies with clouds of rusty silt. It stills, momentarily, and I can smell her breath, hot and sweet – afraid. The commotion has unleashed a thick soup of rotting vegetation and languorous chains of gaseous bubbles rise to the surface, sulphurous, putrid. She attempts to climb the bank again but her legs sink further into the silt, it clings to her, there is nothing she can do. She calls; a cry for help but there is nothing I can do.

She tries again, slithers and slides, trying to find a footing amongst the tangled roots. It is in vain; she cannot escape the sucking grip of the mud as it envelopes her feet and legs. As she succumbs I prepare to welcome her. She can stay here, there are things I can show her. She will find a space, there is room. She will settle quickly, and I will watch and wait and slowly she will learn my secrets and become part of me, and I will shelter her like I shelter

the others.

She is quiet now, the beasts are calling to her, and for her. They can smell her anxiety, so too can I, but there is nothing to fear. Everything ends up here eventually. I feel her descent slow until she is still. She rests against a solid shape, a dark thing of bone, hidden in my depths, all its light inside now. Now she is quiet I can share my secrets with her. If she stays she will need to know but they don't all stay, sometimes they take my stories away with them. Sometimes the light escapes.

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