

ONE

It began with the dog.

John always said that it was a bad idea to get too close to anything that needed you, and I suppose when the dog arrived I had a choice, and I chose wrong, that's all. I should have listened to John, but he was in prison by then, and I was alone and needed something that was just mine for once.

John was my dad's name. He never liked me calling him Dad and didn't call me son, not even when I was young and he was away in the desert making sure we were all safe, and we'd only get to talk on the phone once or twice a month. Him and Mam weren't together then, but they hadn't told anyone and certainly not me. People didn't know until he came home and started living in the woods instead of in our house. Which is when Mam started to worry. At first, he just had a sleeping bag and the few tools he needed, and it could have been a hobby, a bit of fun. But later there was the caravan, and later still, I moved in with him, and it wasn't fun any more.

I liked the caravan. In winter it smelled of mould and peat and oil from the heater, and in summer it smelled of sunlight and hot glass and wild garlic. We were next to the stream and after March the garlic choked the banks with white flowers so that the air was thick with it,

sweet and heavy like nothing I'd smelled before. I didn't know anything about garlic or burdock before I lived with him, couldn't point to a nettle, even. What I knew was streetlights and pavements and locked doors and no plants and no trees. There wasn't any green on the estate. But in the woods, you learned quick, for no better reason than you had to. Sometimes it felt like a different world, away from the real things that happened, which is what John wanted, I think.

The caravan was small. It didn't have carpet or furniture, but it had a narrow room with a bed in it and a fold-out cot in the front part, a stand-up kitchen but no electricity, a toilet but no plumbing. We did our business in the woods, and took water from the stream.

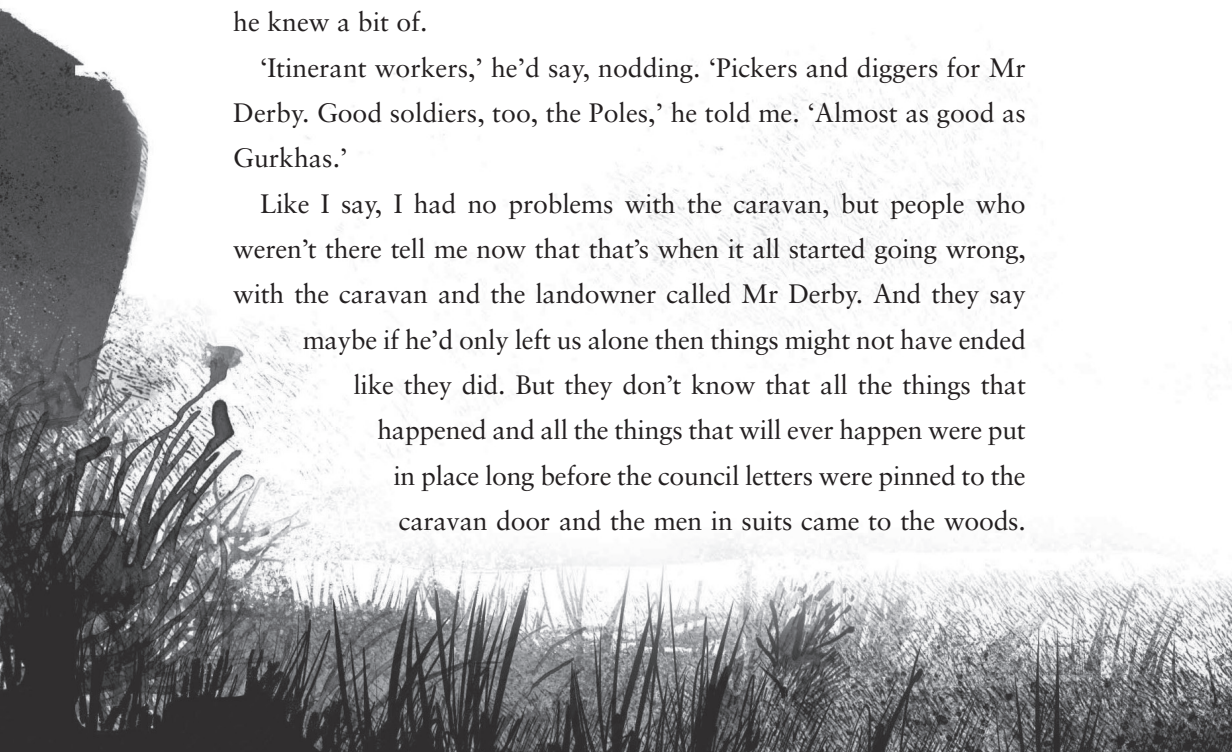


It would take me five long strides to reach the stream from the door of the caravan, and three for John. But once I swear I saw him with my own eyes jump clean out of the bedroom window, straight in, just to show off. Like a man leaping for his life from a fire, but smiling as he went, which is how I like to remember him.

I'd only ever known our house, of course, and the caravan wasn't like the house, and it wasn't clean. And when it was cold it was like sleeping in a sardine can that had been kept in a fridge overnight. One week it snowed so much the roof buckled with the weight, but I liked the noise the raindrops made on the tin-sheet repair after. We were never told whose caravan it was, but we weren't the first because John found lots of papers and things stuffed in bags under the kitchen sink that he said were written in Polish, and Polish was one of the languages he knew a bit of.

'Itinerant workers,' he'd say, nodding. 'Pickers and diggers for Mr Derby. Good soldiers, too, the Poles,' he told me. 'Almost as good as Gurkhas.'

Like I say, I had no problems with the caravan, but people who weren't there tell me now that that's when it all started going wrong, with the caravan and the landowner called Mr Derby. And they say maybe if he'd only left us alone then things might not have ended like they did. But they don't know that all the things that happened and all the things that will ever happen were put in place long before the council letters were pinned to the caravan door and the men in suits came to the woods.



What happened was set out before I was born even, and before John and my mam met, and before the war, too. Before the beasts that had laid quiet under that wood for thousands of years finally climbed up out of the soil. It was all set like a sleeping stone in the earth beneath our feet long before any of us were here, like the bones of bears and wolves and wild bulls that are there if you dig deep enough.

'Things happen despite us, not because of us,' is what John would say, 'and it's pointless fighting it. There are better fights to be had,' he'd tell me, squeezing my hand and looking at me, real warm, like he thought just seeing his smile would let me know what he meant. Which it didn't, not always.

He'd been arrested for burglary, but pleaded trespass, which meant he was banged up anyway, on account of his record. That was the story, but John always said, 'If the coppers want to, they could have you locked up for as long as they want, and that's why you have to make sure you always have someone on your side with clout.' Clout meaning power, meaning money, meaning back-up.

John knew villains, see. Men with flash cars who'd come and park up on the other side of the stream, and them and John would do business while I walked through the trees and tried not to listen too hard in case I heard something I didn't like.

Some of them he got on with and some he didn't, but he always told me, 'Never turn down a chat with a bloke about a job, because you don't know if it'll bring you Gold and Stars.' Gold and Stars were always big with him, cluttering his head, like they were real rather

than just ideas – because of the things he'd heard out in that desert, I suppose, and the things he'd seen. Men turned to red dust in a gunflash, and flames that spewed up from the black sand, straight like fountains. Up to the sky, black and orange and burning.

But I knew the difference.

When they took him down in the court in Leeds, he shouted over to me that he'd be gone no more than a month. So I nodded, and I walked to the bus station with the rucksack the lawyer man had given me on the street, and I got the bus back to our place in the woods, and I never thought to doubt what he said, because John was always right when it came to the coppers and the courts. And it wasn't the first time he'd been banged up, anyway, was it? On account of the other time, back before the caravan and the woods, back when I still thought we'd be a family. Me, him and Mam. So I wasn't too worried, see. I never looked in the rucksack, either, because I knew I'd find the gun there. And I didn't want anything to do with that, because guns meant Pain and Blood and Death, and as far as I was concerned John had seen enough of that already for both of us. But there are some things you can't avoid, no matter how hard you try, and I suppose men of guns always end in a bad way, and that's how it was for him, only I didn't know that then.

TWO

Sometimes, in summer, there'd be other people in the fields close by. Families playing games by their tents, cooking at night and music coming through the trees. That's where I met Sophie, but I'll talk about her later, because she didn't know anything about the dog coming, not until after it all started going bad. And I loved her, and maybe she loved me, but that's all I'll say for now.

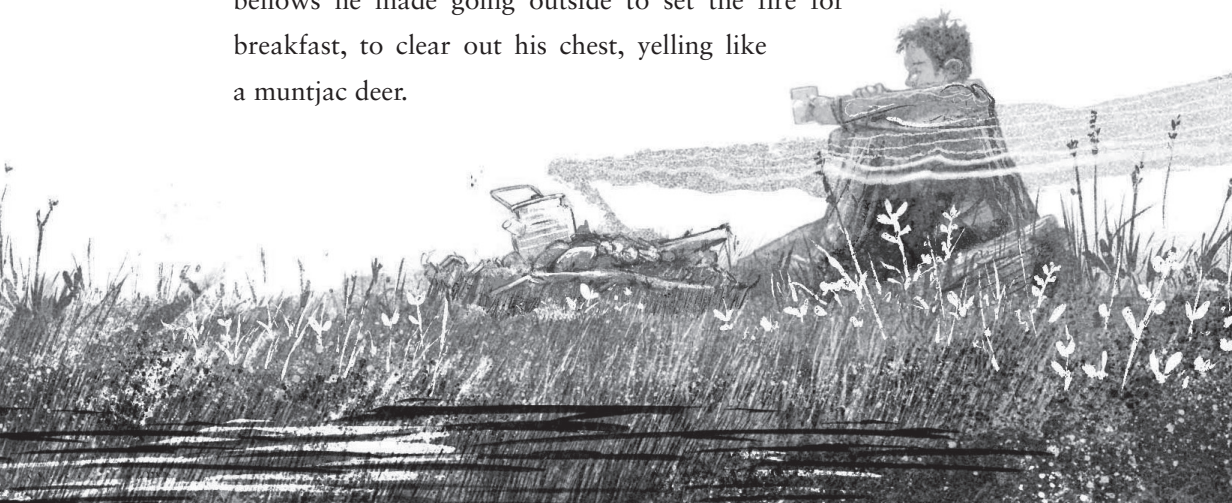
I'd been living with John for half a year, so I already knew how to cook over the camping stove, and how not to waste the paraffin, and how to cover our tracks and stop too much smoke from rising, and find fresh food when I needed it. I could tell sorrel from lords and ladies, and hemlock from cow parsley, and I could name off the top of my head seven different mushrooms for eating.

When John was sent down it was early March, and a real nice one – mists in the first hours but the kind that burned off quick as soon as the sun came out. Most mornings back then I'd drink tea by the small pile of stones I'd press round the fire, for the heat they'd give off, and I'd wonder what we'd do when he came out of Armley Gaol and if things would be different.

Gaol meaning prison, meaning clink, meaning lock-up.

I wondered whether we'd stay in the caravan or if he had new plans – plans that would make me worried and excited at the same time. And I thought other thoughts, like how we all came to be, and how it is that men and women meet and decide to bring a kid into the world, and the magic in all that, and the recklessness, too. I thought about what it meant that some things live only as long as a day, mayflies and the like, and others survive a hundred years or more. And I thought about how when you're on your own, time sort of slows, but not in a bad way, and it gives you space to hear things clearly, birds and that.

Birds were on my mind. Before getting the bus back from Leeds, I'd gone to the big library and got a book out about birdsong and their eggs and nests, and what to look for, and by the time he came back I wanted to be able to show him I recognised nuthatch and different kinds of woodpecker. So I sat and drank the hot tea as the dew glistened on my boots and the glossy blue air filled with cobwebs, and I thought about waking next to him, and his smell, and the great bellows he made going outside to set the fire for breakfast, to clear out his chest, yelling like a muntjac deer.



While I was thinking about all this on that first afternoon alone, the dog appeared, all yellow and still, like the ground itself had spat her out, like she'd been under the earth in the roots and dirt and stones, asleep all this time and content, and only waiting for the right time to show herself to me.

Which I think, looking back, was the truth.

She was a yellow dog with short fur and a black nose and eyes that had a silvery shine when you looked close. They stared back at you and past you at the same time, which I didn't mind at all.



‘Here, girl.’

She looked at me and past me, and turned.

‘Come on, don’t be shy.’

There was a long, narrow clearing by the caravan where we’d strip the nettles right down, John and me. Low enough so the new growth was clean and tender, instead of woody. New leaves made the best nettle tea, John said. Anyway, the dog wandered down the outside of the nettle paddock, nosed me, curious and sort of sleepy-eyed, as though having woken from a long dream. Then, seeing that I was no threat, she went back up the trail on the opposite side, through the died-back sorrel and chervil, before doing it all over again. Each time she made her round and lifted her head to look at me, it was as though she was seeing me for the first time. Gentle and helpless, and trusting.

After an hour, the dog lay down near the fire and I went over to see if she had a collar.

A small brassy disc had the name ‘Molly’ engraved on it.

I went to the van and got a coil of blue baling twine and tied it around the dog’s neck, and tried training her to sit. But she hated the twine and shook her head so hard, trying to get it loose, that I was worried she’d hurt herself. So I gave up on tying her, and after that I never did use the twine again. Anyway, she already knew how to sit.



THREE

'John says you're not to open the bag, and don't tell anyone about it. Do you understand? He'll collect it when he's back. He wants to know if you're looking after yourself.'

This was the lawyer man on the phone the next day. He told me to call him Alan, but I never did call him anything. I didn't know him and didn't really want to. There were a lot of fellas I didn't want to know, more every day, I thought. I wondered where they all came from and why, because the world certainly didn't seem to have a lack of them these days.

'When's he coming back, did he say?'

'You're to stay at the caravan, and try not to show yourself too often. If you need anything, you're to call me.'

'Course,' I said. Because, I thought, where else would I go?

He must have heard the thought through the telephone wire somehow, because he said: 'There's the matter of your mother. Have you heard from her?'

John had a mobile that he used sometimes for work, but he didn't really do with phones, so I'd had to walk into town to use the payphone near the shops, dialling the number on the business card the Leeds lawyer had given me outside the courts, along with the rucksack.

It was still morning, and I looked to the shopfronts around the square and the one or two people that were about. Mol was sitting being petted by a passerby, some old lady with a gentle face who purred and coddled and called Mol 'darling', and seemed nice.

'No,' I said. 'Not for a while. Why?'

'Well, you might want to tell her you're OK. We don't want social services sniffing around the caravan, do we? Not while you're on your own. Maybe you should think about going back to school.'

'Did John say that?'

'About your mother? No, but it's sensible, isn't it? Maybe she'll give you some money.'

'Don't need any. I'm all right.'

'Nevertheless, I'll visit you in a couple of days, see that things are as they should be. In the meantime, tell no one your father's away. And no looking in the bag, you understand? Keep your head down and don't cause any trouble. And listen, if a man called Toomey comes around, don't talk to him. He's a Bad Man. Oh,' he added then, sounding sort of embarrassed, 'and John says, watch out for bears, whatever that means. But I suppose you'll know.'

'Beautiful dog, isn't she?' said the old woman, when I put down the phone. She was cupping Mol's face in her hands. 'What is she?'

I still had the lawyer's words rattling loud in my head, but I looked at Mol's pale fur and her grey eyes. 'A retriever maybe? She's a good girl,' I told the lady, not knowing what else to say. I wanted to be away, in case someone I knew recognised me. My school wasn't far away,

just half a mile from the shops, and even though I hadn't been there for ages now, someone would still recognise me if they saw me, and I didn't want to be seen. Because no way was I going back there, no matter what the Leeds lawyer said. No matter, school was over for me.

'If you like her, you can have her,' I said to the old woman, trying to make a joke. I felt nervous. That thing the lawyer had said about someone called Toomey made me think I shouldn't be out and about if I didn't need to be.

I didn't like the name, because it made me think of graveyards and dank stone and death. Had John mentioned him before? He'd told me most of the blokes' names but this one didn't mean anything to me.

Toomey.

'No, darling, I can tell she loves you. You keep her,' the old woman said, going along with the joke and nodding to Mol. 'Sweet old girl,' she added, which made me feel sort of sad, because I hadn't even noticed Mol was old. I'd never had a dog before, and she was new to me so I thought she must be new all round. Stupid, really.

'Thank you,' was all I could say, walking away. I'd wanted to make another call, but I felt exposed in the shopping square, so I made off. Mol followed me, and when I looked back a minute later the old woman was still there, but she wasn't smiling any more. Maybe she'd noticed the dirt on my clothes, and the tears in the sleeves of my coat, because she looked sort of worried and about to say something, glancing around for someone to tell, before thinking better of it.

FOUR

'I'LL COME TONIGHT, if John's away.' This was Mam an hour later, after I'd walked down the bypass and found the payphone by the bus stop. 'We could go to the pub and have something hot to eat, if you like. John won't mind. How'd he do in court?'

'Good,' I lied. 'He's to go back in a month's time.'

'So, about tea tonight—'

'No, I'm fine. I just wanted to say hello, that's all. He'll be back at ten,' I said, with another lie – they'd been piling up since she'd answered the call. John was away on business, that was it. Wetherby, buying or selling, I didn't know which. Simple lies were the best, that much I did know – easy to believe. But I hadn't bargained on how I'd feel hearing her voice, and now it was making my guts turn and ache. Because of the nerves there.

'Are you safe?'

'I – I'm fine, yeah.' Guilt, twisting, was it? Or maybe I just missed her like buggery.

My mam, her name's Joanne – Jo to people who know her – but she's Mam to me. The summer he was back from overseas – John, I mean – Mam had been dead nervous. 'Happy nerves,' she'd told me when I asked. But they were nerves that shook through her every day

from first in the morning to the last fag at night in the garden, holding herself thin against the rake of the sunshine and thinking things I couldn't fathom. 'What do you suppose he'd like to eat?' she'd ask, staring to the sky. 'We should sort the backroom out, make it like an office for him, to get away from us when he needs to. You know, quiet.' And the next day when we were at the shops: 'What do you think of this one?' with her trying on dresses, pulling them from the racks in shops and this searing love in her face that shone like a real bright light and made her seem drunk to me. So maybe they were still together, after all, or at least she thought so, hoped so. Because that's how she behaved, like a lass in love. 'No big fuss,' she'd say, 'but a celebration. Let's show him we've missed him, eh?'

Every day was like that, her happy and worried and planning, and me going along with it, happy to make her happy. But the thing is, I hadn't missed him, not really. Maybe I'd been too young when he went, and the times he'd spent at home were so rare and filled with a sort of chaos. Happy chaos, like Mam's happy nerves. And her and him going off like sweethearts, like kids, and me watching. And maybe I was jealous, maybe I was, but we'd been fine together, her and me, or so I'd thought.

'Maybe you'll come see me soon. I'm free on Saturday, or Sunday I'll be in the shop.' Mam, she worked in the newsagent's, then at the nursing home the rest of the time. 'Hello?'

'Hello. Yeah,' I said, 'maybe.'

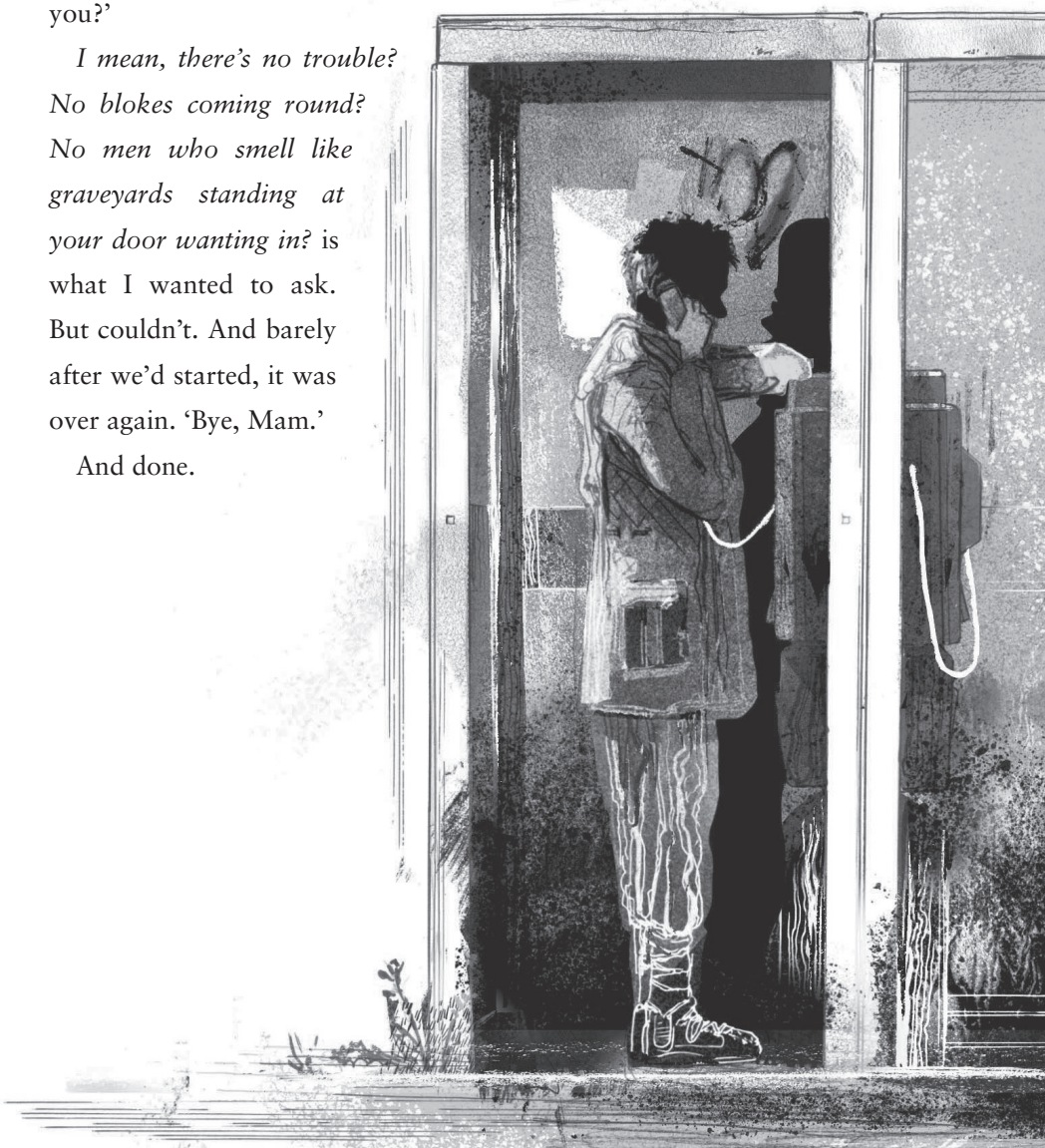
It was me that had called, but now I was talking to her, I wanted

out of it. I could hear the nerves there again, but these weren't happy nerves, but something else. Something sadder, and all because of me, I thought, which is a bloody hard thought to hold onto, I can tell you.

'Course,' I said. 'I'm fine. I better get off, but you're all right, aren't you?'

I mean, there's no trouble? No blokes coming round? No men who smell like graveyards standing at your door wanting in? is what I wanted to ask. But couldn't. And barely after we'd started, it was over again. 'Bye, Mam.'

And done.





Thing about Mam is there's no one better than her, and so why would I up and leave for a stinking van in the woods? There was school, of course, that I hated and that hated me. And there was the change in us all that year he was back, but mainly there was John. She knew it as well as me, the truth of it, I mean. She knew what he needed and what he couldn't stand. When he was bad, when he was lashed with pain and anger, he'd let no one near him but me. It would be me he'd let hold him, me he'd apologise to. Me, and not her, which must have broke her heart, I suppose. What heart there was left unbroken.

I was her son more than his, and so I took on what she'd taken on, whether I liked it or not.

'He's like a pet that wants free,' she'd tell me sometimes, before he came, back when it was her and me and the house was home. Before guns and Toomey and seven kinds of eating mushroom. Back when she had dreams. Sometimes she'd wrap her arms around me at night before bed, like she needed to have something – anything – in her arms or she'd go mad. Her behind me, chin on my shoulder, voice in my ear. 'He can't stand fussing, but let him go wild and he'd starve to death.' It would be a joke between us, because he could hardly make toast, so how was he surviving in the desert? And good job they had a mess there, eh? Mess meaning kitchen, meaning cooks, meaning proper food. Not chaos. The joke was a way of not thinking about the war, of us forgetting.

The happy nerves got worse, closer we got. Then John's flight landed, and it was party time. Mam and me had put out a big sign in the front garden, blue school poster paint on an old pink bedsheet: *WELCOME BACK*. We'd got the neighbours round, and white plastic furniture and a barbecue and balloons. Music playing on a stereo through the open windows of the frontroom, and me and Mam dancing on the grass in our bare feet. Old music – Bob Marley and Bowie and The Jam. Stuff he liked. By midday he still hadn't shown up. Mam got a text to say he had things he needed to sort out, old colleagues to see, desert mates.

Sorry, he'd said. *Soon, though. Love to the lad.*

The burgers and hotdogs got eaten, and the music played on, but me, I was waiting for him, waiting for his silhouette at the end of the street. Dreading it and wanting it at the same time, because by then I'd caught the bug, the excitement and the happy nerves. Mam pulled me back to the party, and later that night when we were packing everything up, she was saying that it was all fine, all of it. He just wanted to check in with his buddies. 'It all takes time,' she said. 'It's a big thing, coming home. We need to be patient.'

The bears and stags John would talk about later weren't even a thing back then. This was before the dreams of wolves underground, before they woke me up clawing at the dirt. My mind was just on school and TV and Mam, and part of me hoped he wouldn't be back at all. Part of me prayed for it, no matter how stupid that seems. Because it's not that I even believe in God. But you pray for all sorts

when you're scared. Mam was first in them, me praying for God to keep her safe and make her happy. I'd say these things under my breath at night, while I could hear Mam downstairs, clearing up or setting things in the kitchen for the morning. I prayed that I could make her happy somehow, prayed to be strong. I prayed and I looked out at the stars above the streetlights and I prayed for everything to stay the same, too.

And maybe, I tell myself, maybe I should have prayed harder, or maybe God knows when you don't really believe in Him, sees through the lie, because if He was any sort of god, He would, wouldn't He? Either way, things did change. That's nature. And before I knew it, it was just John and me in the woods. And Mam, she was at home and waiting for us. And that's how it stayed for a while.

Woods were always his home, I think. Not a house. Sometimes it felt like he'd been born in the ferns, with moss as his bed. He'd often talk about how he'd lived alone for months in a forest in Europe, before he came back, before we even knew he was coming home. He was out the army then, working contract work. Anyway, in this forest, he said, they still had prehistoric creatures, bears larger than any bear you've seen and bison the size of houses. 'Not like the American bison,' he'd say, smiling and shaking his head like the idea itself was stupid. 'These were taller, with longer horns.'

I didn't believe him, but he had a photograph, which I still have now. It's blurry, the photo, and the bison is half hidden by the trees, but it is pretty big, and black and ancient-looking. He'd show me the

photo every now and then when he'd talk about what things were like before everything went to shit, as he'd call it. I'm not sure if he meant the world or his life.

He'd never let me hold the photograph or touch it when he was alive. Some things were sort of sacred to him, like the photo of his grandfather, and the bison and the letters from Mam he kept bundled together that we found after, when it was over.

That March when it all ended, though, he'd slap his hand against the sunlit ground that was still damp from winter, and say, 'And there are the same creatures under here. There were bears and wolves and stags as tall as oak in this country, too. We had all sorts of animals. This is an ancient land, older than anyone knows. This bloke, William Blake, knew that. He painted pictures and wrote poems, did Blake, and he saw what was coming and what had been. And they'll come back, you'll see. They're not gone for ever. The world is just sleeping, and those beasts are asleep with it, but one day they'll climb out of the forest and things will get back to how it should be. You'll see,' he'd say, like it wouldn't be long. 'You'll see.'

