



Where do you go when the one person who is supposed to keep you safe is the one you need to run from?

THE GIRL IN THE WOODS

The bramble catches in her hair, making her cry out. She stops and backs up, turns her head so she can see to untangle it. It's a tall, vicious plant, grown high and contorted through a Hawthorn tree, to get to the light above the forest floor. She tugs at her hair, tries to detach it from the stem but its thorns keep sticking into her fingers and making her eyes water.

She drags the arm of her cardigan down over her hand to protect her skin, and pulls hard on the bramble again. This time, after a few seconds she is finally free. She looks back to see several strands of her hair hanging from the sharp finger of bramble, and it makes her stomach tighten with nausea. She thinks of the dusty sweepings of a hairdresser's floor, the unpleasant tangle of hair in the shower plug, the dull mat pulled out of a hairbrush; they all seem to speak of death and people's ultimate temporariness.

She goes on into the trees; fallen leaves and rusty bracken fronds crunch under her trainers and release a pleasant, earthy smell. It's so peaceful here, there's no wind, and the air is mild. She falls into a comfortable pace, enjoying the movement of her legs, the sensation of breathing the clean air deep into her lungs. Her boyfriend, Dom, brought her here for the first time a few months ago; he said it would be good for them to get out of the city. He was right, she'd come away feeling clean and peaceful for the first time in years; and that's why she's come here today, to be somewhere clean and peaceful to say her goodbyes. And then, it's time to move on.

The trees feel benign and watchful, she touches their trunks as she walks past as if they are old friends. There are huge old Elms, their bark pitted and rough, branches twisted and powerful as muscled arms; and slender silver birch's, their trunks gleaming white like bone and their leaves tattered and turning to gold. If you take a step back, she realises, trees are improbable and crazy things, springing up so huge and gnarled out of our parks and pavements. If aliens landed on earth, trees would probably be the thing they found most exotic.

She could quite easily just keep on walking. She wonders how long she could go before finding a road or farmer's field. There's something beguiling about the idea, of just walking, but she knows she must stop soon. She needs to find the right place, she needs to do what she came here to do.

She keeps seeing places but then discounting them: the ground not flat enough, too over-hung, or too dense with foliage. As she walks she

starts to feel afraid. She wishes Dom could be with her, she wishes she didn't have to hurt him, to hurt any of the people she loves; but she knows that it has fallen to her, to go on alone and take all the shame and sadness with her.

She steps over a fallen tree, looks up, and instantly knows she has found the perfect place: the ground is flat and clear, the canopy of the trees is thinner and dappled light patterns the ground with luminous lace.

She sits down on the fallen tree and takes off her rucksack. Suddenly business-like she takes several things out of the front pocket: her phone and battery; a bottle of water; and a sweet tin, which she knows contains six small white pills. She takes a deep breath and puts the battery back into her phone. After a few moments the screen lights up and it pings continuously for about ten seconds as a series of voicemails and texts appear on the screen. Most are from Dom and her mum; she can't bring herself to read them. There's only one person she needs to contact right now, and it's not her mum, or Dom. She opens up a new message and types:

Hi Siân, I'm just letting you know that I'm going now, and I wanted to say goodbye. I'm sorry, I know how much you'd hoped that I could go to court, but I really can't. I feel like I've failed you, but I just don't have the strength to face him in that way. You may find it hard to believe this but you really have helped me. You're the only person I've ever told, and when I did it was like taking a great weight off my shoulders. And you made me realise that it wasn't my fault, and that has meant a lot. But I'm so tired, Siân, so tired of carrying the heaviness and the pain of it. I can't do it anymore, I need to go and find somewhere I can put the weight down and I can only think of one place. I've sent letters to mum and Dom but I haven't told them what he did to me, and I don't want you to. Thank you for being my best friend. Love Zoe xxxx

She fights back the urge to cry, her breath coming shallow and fast. She sends the message, double-checks it's gone then takes the battery back out of the phone and throws them both haphazardly across the clearing.

She drinks from her water bottle then opens the little tin and takes each of the pills out and lays them on a big sycamore leaf by her feet. She stares at them and thinks again of Dom and for a second she wavers, but she's doing this for him as much as anyone. She's setting him free. Resolutely she picks up each pill and swallows them one after the other with a big gulp of water; then, shakily, she gets to her feet and moves to the middle of the clearing.

She opens her rucksack and takes out a blanket. She shakes it open and lays it on the ground, then puts the rucksack at the top. She lies down, puts her head onto the rucksack and looks up. The light blinds her for a moment, but then her eyes adjust, and she sees the delicate fingers of the birches stroking the white sky.

She closes her eyes, imagines the pills inside her, her stomach acid slowly dissolving them, the essence of them hitting her blood stream. Her mind wanders into dark places. She remembers the first time *he* touched her in that wrong way. She was at Melanie's sixth birthday party at the local swimming pool; they had played in the water for over an hour, then had finally, reluctantly, got out for the birthday dinner, their swimming costumes slick as Dolphin skin. He had come over to dry her and when he had, his hand had lingered between her legs, and it hadn't felt right, and she'd felt sick, but convinced herself he hadn't meant to do it.

But then, just a week later, she'd been looking out of her bedroom window one night, watching a brightly-lit train snake along the track to Highbury below her like a deep-sea electric fish; and he'd come into her room. After that, there was no question that he had meant to do it, and he'd gone on doing it until she'd turned sixteen. And all those years too, in her tiny bedroom, listening to her mother whimpering through the wall, probably trying not to cry out and wake the children; thinking she was protecting them, taking the pain herself, but not knowing; never imagining; what her husband was doing to his own daughter most nights before he got into bed next to her.

Is this why she had never told her mum, because she hadn't wanted to add to the misery and failure she knew she already felt? She worked herself to the bone trying to make some kind of a life for Zoe and her brother, taking her dad's insults and jibes with a silent stoicism that made Zoe want to hurt herself. And sometimes she would; sneaking up to her room and gouging lines in her arms with an old math's compass.

And Zoe has always known that her mum will never leave him, whatever he does. It is a kind of madness that seems impossible to fight because there is nothing you can take hold of about it; no rationality, no sense, just despair.

She opens her eyes and hot tears run down the sides of her face and onto the blanket. She thinks the pills must have started to work, her limbs feel heavy while her face and her mind are light and buoyant. She takes a long slow breath and tries to analyse what she's feeling. There's some fear, some trepidation in the face of the unknown. There's some sadness too, particularly for Dom. He really does love her, and that is something amazing and beautiful. But he doesn't know the deep dark places that parts of her live in, and she never wants him to. Better for him to think of her making a fresh start, to picture her sitting on a train

heading for some little coastal town, changing her name and renting a flat. Somewhere quiet and cheap and where people don't ask questions.

The sun suddenly comes out from between the clouds and light floods onto her face, catching her like an insect in amber. The feeling of weightlessness deepens, and a flush of wellbeing embraces her. She keeps her eyes closed and focuses on what she can hear; separating and counting the sounds. Birdsong is the clearest, then the gentle clicking of the silver birch branches in the breeze, and the sound of the distant traffic, an ever so faint roar, like an extended breath. She tries to focus harder, deeper, to sink below the obvious sounds. She fancies she can hear the movement of small creatures in the undergrowth, even something coming from the ground below her - a kind of deep ticking.

If only she could simplify herself down to breathing and feeling alone, and switch off her consciousness. When her childhood was stolen from her that night twelve years ago; she had felt the tragedy of human children keenly: that they must grow up and 'know'; that they had no choice but to pass from ignorance and simplicity into the dark, labyrinthine adult world.

A scratching sound by her right ear makes her open her eyes and turn her head. A huge crow; the blackness of its feathers molten with peacock purples, blues and cyans, looks at her; its button eyes knowing and curious. After a second it launches off into the trees, the displaced air from its beating wings moves across her face, making her breath catch in her throat, the way babies do when the wind blows into their faces.

There's definitely something happening now. Her heart has started to vibrate and flutter, and the feeling of insubstantiality has become so strong that she has begun to wonder if gravity is going to be enough to hold her down. She'll be going soon, she can feel it. She decides to look around her and impress what she sees deep into her mind; but then the view tips, and instead of looking *up* into the tree-tops, she is looking *down*, into a foliage-lined tunnel towards a circle of blazing white.

She feels herself start to fall towards the light, and it is such a beautiful, soft falling that it is as if she is caught on a breath; and the further she falls, the more the light seems to be calling to her; and when it finally absorbs her she realises that the light is full of love, and for the first time in her life she feels completely free.

*The Girl in the Woods is adapted from one of the chapters in my novella,
The Call.*

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