

A Place to Breathe

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10pm: The phone rings, I'm almost asleep - I answer the call: 'Mum, I think we're being followed.'

My phone light trespasses the dark living room. An upturned mug spills brown liquid in a stream-like-escape towards the carpet. The assailant – the cat, is nowhere to be seen.

'What do you mean, followed – and *we*?'

'Me and Joe! The police are trailing us.'

Joe is my daughter's boyfriend; trouble never far.

I shut my eyes – exhausted – and attempt to free my feet from my cotton cocoon. The dogs keep them trapped. The warmth drinks me in.

'Mum?'

I've forgotten to reply, tempted by the draw of an undisturbed night's sleep; surviving my second stretch of 'teenager hell' by the skin-of-my-teeth. I wonder if the gates to Hades will finally fill with cooled brimstone when: 00.00 June 30th 2021 arrives...

'Why would the police follow *you*?'

Dog one grumbles as I scissor my feet; dog two bounces from *our* pillow. The guilty-glut of Prosecco from earlier punches me in the face as I sit up too quickly.

'We've been down The Lane, and you know what goes on there...'

I do. And, I don't like it for many reasons: I don't support the drugs *or* nocturnal blanket behaviour. I appreciate less, the black patches of grass from untamed fires, set near woodland plots, mimicking worship pyres to the underworld. I do not like my child being in The Lane at night; she's a moth attracted to the dimness of lamp light – a free-soul, dancing precariously on the grassy verges of an ASBO.

I hold my breath to quash the familiar tingle of anxiety...

By day, The Lane is sumptuous and green. It has a network of honey-combed patchwork that stretches through Ludwell Valley. Its reach is broad and lush, an expansion of wilds and history tangled with the concrete arteries of the M5 and A roads clogging their once palatial views. There are echoes of cautious footprints - brushy tails. It's a dog walker's paradise exuding sanguine pockets of solitude.

'Jemima?' the phone hangs silent.

'Don't worry Mum, I was being paranoid. Me and Joe...'

'Joe and I!'

'Whatever. Me and Joe have gone the back way. Home in a sec.'

I get the familiar 'hang-up' tone. Now I wait...

I can't breathe.

10.45pm: The front room door bursts open along with all capillaries. 'Mum? Are you awake?'

I count to fourteen before I accept that 'playing dead' has not evaded unwanted conversation.

'I am now' is all I muster, annoyed that this endless skirmish of parent vs. child never resolves.

In this moment I shamelessly imagine a time when this will all be over, demanding my nineteen year old self has surgery to remove her womb.

'Mum?' I wait for an admission.

My lungs feel like they have collapsed while I wait for my daughter's prelude statement.

'Can we go to Tesco's tomorrow? Need eyelashes'.

I am dumbfounded.

'Jemima, are you kidding?'

I don't wait for a reply. I reach for my headphones and close my eyes as she slams my door.

The scaffold plank used as a rustic shelf above my sofa-bed rattles; I wait for the Maharaja dolls to fall – or something heavier – the Arabian coffee pot, as the staircase comes alive with the sound of foot-stomps.

I drown them out with binaural beats and imagine being somewhere deliciously wild and free...

The music soothes my anxiety.

I recall this morning's walk at The Lane. I meditate *that* world into me. At dawn it was shrouded in fog – thick and suffocating – a fog evoking three ominous thuds on a wooden door from a pirate's hook.

I'd searched for my breath then, too, in the sounds of water, birds, and trees that *bend with the wind*.

A late spring breeze brushed me; laced with tiny droplets of warmth. Overhead the sun was fighting a gallant battle with the spiteful frost underfoot.

I surveyed the area – not another human. Perfect. Releasing dogs one and two, they rushed to seek refuge in the overgrown bank by the stream, 'emptying-out' to gain better land-speed for their tennis ball playmate. Searching for the bin, I found a severed metal pole where it should have been, and a fly-tipped mini-fridge filled with someone's lack of conscience.

I breathe deeper...

Morning walks are special; it's when the world speaks in hushed voices. Morning signifies the end of listening to the repetitive 3am footsteps overhead from my son and his friend – bombed on shotties from his bong; the long hours of night spent focussing on where I went wrong.

Thankfully, the youthful hours of morning draw me into the hidden-wilds with the dogs, hidden because of the towering blocks-of-bricks that seem to breed around them.

I recall the sun of the morning, thawing the most wonderful smells of wild garlic and early buds of bluebell. I inhaled the freshness bursting around me, deep and long.

The still-silence as an early visitor to such a terrific open-space always evaporates the tightness in my fists and lungs. The fog cleared – no longer a wall, but a billowing Persian courtesan's veil revealing a sprawling *Monet de la Voie*.

The sun must have thawed the birds from their nests, too, because they broke out into their, far superior, rendition of Celine Dion's, *My Heart Will Go On*. A fat robin landed near my foot, safe for at least the next 23 seconds; dog one occupied with a stick big enough to plough a field; dog two rather partial to a bird for breakfast.

11.10pm: My music stops, my phone lights up the bluish-black – Jemima continues to stalk my sanity. 'Muuuuuummm?'

My chest tightens. My lungs shrink.

'Yes!' My answer is as sharp as her tongue.

'God Mum, are you still in a wig?'

I edit my initial response before it sails down the receiver, 'not at all – I was listening to my music?'

'Your hippie music?' I hear her silent laugh.

I end the call, resume my 'hippie' music and drift back to my favourite dawn fields...

I stepped over a snail and crouched down – fascinated by the sticky bum-glue trailing over two rocks, a beer can, and a pea-green Crock. I gently lifted it from the gravelled pathway, placing it along the base of a sapling inside the wire A-frame protecting it.

The pathway narrowed as I got closer to a private avenue of alder catkins and hedgerows ghosted with blackcaps and whitethroats. Both kingfisher and egret who swim among the carrier bags, and the marooned car battery holding up the floating traffic behind it, reserved judgement over my declarations of how, if I'd had my time over – as much as 'I love my children' – I would not have had any in the first place. I

appreciate their congruence. Having confided such 'revelations' to other parents, their recoil of horror was much like a brick to my head.

I needed to get higher. Climbing hills pushes air into my lungs like a ventilator. I become the air, the wind – my breath. The air crisp despite the sun's touch, like shards of glass hitting the back of my throat. How awful this beautiful landscape is; how beautiful this awful landscape is. How beautiful this shitty mother is; how shitty these beautiful children are.

My breath wavers... just like the wind-dusted trees.

My mind stilled. My heart sagged. My faith faltered... the wind dropped. The stream hushed. The birds closed their beaks. The trees stilled. The sun halted. The moon set. The traffic stuck. The dogs disappeared into the undergrowth.

A high-pitched screech overhead, long and slow; elegant, majestic, commanding. I was summoned to *The King's Road*, the highest point at Ludwell: a huge network of greening mounds. The calling buzzard, insistent I follow – eyes fixed on the circling messenger caught in the aerial thermal stream above.

Lowering my gaze, the push-me-pull-you gate greeted me; the land beyond now deathly quiet as the buzzard's call fell silent.

I reached a small cluster of woodland on a high bank, surrounded by a broken fence, jagged and lop-sided under the mass of brambles stirring after winter's nap. I made my way uphill; sheer – legs feeling cement-filled, trudging through slippery trails of sleeping dandelions. The birds precipitously livened at my clumsy presence.

A scent of perfume wafted by. It sat in the air; tacky and repugnant. I lowered to the ground.

I didn't want to see another human.

Dogs one and two assumed trouble, running at me full-pelt, coating my face in fox-poo-hoo. Surprisingly, I was fine with this, despite the odds of catching some pernicious disease. Anything is better than catching 'human'.

The tacky perfume never materialised; the relief of remaining alone in the wild washed over me. Though sitting so low to the ground had squashed my insides, flattening my lungs into three-day-old pork chops.

The outskirts of the wooded area were awash with stingers – nettles as tall as me; prickly hoards of armed soldiers with needles poised to wound. My assailed waist-tied coat teasing their tips with gentle slaps as the sun pushed through the foliage like Morse code. The flashes pulled my gaze down to meet a carpet of pinkening daisies, unfurling with the sun's kisses. My shadow, refracted by the glowing sun-shards looked tall and wiry – it made the 'real me' feel small. Looking from daisies to shadow, I recalled my eight-year old self picking the heads off these flowers to make chains.

Perhaps I ought to reconsider my *own* impact, my influence, and call the children for a *family meeting*? I'll bring the lead balloon and riot act...

Astonishingly I find my first full breath in ages.

Stepping onto the brow of Ludwell's sumptuous curves, a second, familiar bench welcomed me. I was as high as the landscape and my flightless body would allow. A worn, brass plaque gripped the wooden frame, resonating more deeply than ever...

Reserved for the fool on the hill