

Rachel's Garden
by Louise Worthington

Prologue

Your legs carry you to the familiar depths of the wood where the trees are so thick and dense the sunlight barely finds its way to the earth. You pass like a shadow beneath the trees, merging with them, moving further and further away from Maple Cottage, from your home, through long grass and the gentle enemy of holly. Your footfall is the only terrible sound over twigs and fallen branches, over patches of ivy, monkshood and death mushrooms.

When you are satisfied you have found the best place, you begin to forage amongst the chaos of trees and rotten wood, the flora and the deadly. Your wax jacket has ample pockets. Perhaps it is late morning, and you haven't eaten yet.

Birds are startled and they flee, shrieking and unsettling leaves as they burst through to an open sky that is an indistinguishable stitched line of heaven where the eye of the sun watches, as if through a needle. Sand has been dug out of the earth by badgers making setts and rabbits building a labyrinth of burrows. The sand looks red and tangy, thrown in amongst the damp brown soil, armies of nettles and mossy stones.

You screw up your eyes when you look at the leaves and berries in the soil-stained palm of your hand where the lines criss-cross like a path that some might say led you to this place. You can smell the spice of ferns, wildflowers and the unmistakable scent of a fox, which stirs memories of feathers. So many feathers. The memory draws you further into the world where woodpecker holes are the only eyes that watch you because no one knows you are making this dark pilgrimage.

Foxgloves. Slender spires of poisonous purple signal you with their deceiving elegance and the grace of their bell-shaped heads. They travel with you from the open woodland to your garden, though bumble bees would have loved stuffing themselves into the tubular bells for pollen and nectar. A bramble claws at your hand, cuts a finger.

You make a roll call of your ingredients and turn back. It is silent, and the walk of your prayer will soon be answered. Nature is listening and answering your footfall.

The cottage door is unlocked and open, and so are all the windows. The house waits for your return, remembering.

Chapter One

December 2018

This month is for sorting and sifting through boxes, suitcases and bags; next year will be for mending and growing. I have it all planned out in my head and coded on a calendar in the kitchen. December's picture is of snowdrops; my code for a new start with Adam is 'F' for future, when my life will start to exist in the shape it's meant to, the way I intended it to. Not the shape it got mauled into like a second-hand pillow.

When I removed the calendar from the wall of our apartment and put it in a cardboard box, together with all the other items I was moving to our new home, I looked at the hook it had hung on for a long time. Seeing it jutting out from the bare wall, I realised the big day had arrived, but all I had that was tangible was the hook and the cardboard box. Everything else was hope.

At Maple Cottage, our new home, I have faith that my dreams will come true because my parents were happily married there. It's a special place where one has to listen to the pure silence.

The cottage is situated in a dead-end. We have one neighbour – a lovely woman called Shirley. The lane has remained pockmarked with potholes for years to discourage strangers. On one side there are Peckforton Woods, and on the other there are open fields that stretch out for miles across the Cheshire plains.

At our apartment in Altrincham, the streets were rarely spared from restless people and traffic. Sounds were constantly weaving from early morning through to night: shrill hooting of cars; dustbins rumbling; sirens, and drunken cackles lit by the firefly of a cigarette. We were close to Manchester Airport, which suited my husband Adam because he works in China recruiting students to UK boarding schools for about seven months of the year. But to me, the sound of a plane landing was a kind of artificial thunder.

As a part-time history teacher at Nantwich County High School, I have a much shorter commute now and three weeks' holiday to settle us in before the Lent term commences in January. I inherited Maple Cottage three years ago after Dad died. We didn't move in because Adam said that we should rent out the cottage while my grief was raw. We've sold our apartment in Altrincham now. This is our new home, our forever home, I hope.

Aided by firefighters and a lot of blowing and teasing of paper and sticks, I manage to light a fire in the lounge. Peering into mesmerising flames, I think it is possible to believe in forgetfulness. It is possible to forget that the icy breath of December is blowing between the cracks in the windows. Now that my toes are warm, it is possible to forget that there is a kind of hunger in the wind outside that has sent hedgehogs into hibernation and moles into wombs made of leaves.

In other ways, though, my memory is too reliable. I cannot forget the secrets in the wood, or the way the branches on the trees wave at me with a child's hands. I cannot forget the poppy-shaped bruises.

I've dreamed of living at Maple Cottage for the last three years. Now I am finally here, it doesn't feel completely real even after sleeping for five days under its roof. I love the way the cottage is built from indigenous red sandstone, giving the exterior a warm, rustic complexion. The decorative leaded windows and the bulbous central chimney are defining features in this characterful home. The sturdy front door is well-weathered, a familiar face from an album of hundreds of happy family photographs of my parents and me. I can't wait to climb Peckforton Hill to see the cottage from below, to see wreaths of smoke billowing from its chimney once again.

I gaze into the fire. It sizzles and hisses, licks the sticks of wood and works its tongue around a log I found in the garage. Peckforton Woods was always integral to our lives, and now its wood is keeping me warm.

When I turned thirteen, Dad's roots started to grow out from under Maple Cottage and the back garden up to the woods. Like ventricles from a heart, they pumped their way up Peckforton Hill. He spent hours there most days, became taciturn and quick-tempered, while Mum walked the landing waiting anxiously for his return when the moon was his only torch. From my bedroom I'd hear her sighs; they were like waves, sometimes coming so fast that I thought we might drown. But Dad always returned, sending us to a contented sleep until the morning.

Dad died just six months after Mum's funeral. I stripped Maple Cottage and redecorated it. House Rentals told me what needed upgrading to get a decent rental income. Cataracted by grief, I rushed through the house, packing, discarding, removing. I have repeated the

same actions in China and the UK, in bedsits and apartments, because no place has ever felt right.

Copyright

Bloodhound Books 2021