

Forest Bathing

'He's eighteen,' I say. 'Surely he should be growing out of it?'

The Doctor shrugs. *I can always give you something.*

As ever, I refuse. One of us needs to be fully *compos mentis* if we're to come out of this alive.

Apart from the Doctor, I don't discuss the situation with anyone except my best friend Sophie. I guess I feel ashamed. I say little to Finn's father, Pete, because we rarely communicate and I don't want to give him the satisfaction of thinking I can't cope. But sometimes I have to stop myself from calling him up and screaming, *You caused this, you bastard. It's all your fault.*

Earlier today, Finn promised to accompany me on a walk in the woods. That sounds nice, doesn't it? Normal. Cosy. A young man going for a stroll with his Mum. The walk's my favourite, but I rarely go there because usually the valley's deserted during the week and as the track's muddy and studded with roots and stones, I'm afraid of slipping and lying there, unfound. Finn wouldn't bother coming to look for me. He'd just shrug and raid the fridge and slope off to his room. *Thought she was at work*, he'd say.

Nevertheless, the pull of the setting is constant. According to Sophie, who's really into what the Japanese call *Forest Bathing*, the woods are an ideal location. Apparently, it's all about purposefully relaxing and wandering and giving yourself up to absorbing every aspect of nature - and at the end, you feel fantastic. I'm not sure how this differs from just ambling along, but I agree it's therapeutic.

The matchless Dartmoor scenery is one of the main reasons we moved here eight years ago, hoping that the calm would help Pete recover from his breakdown. *A typical*

pattern of urban stress was the diagnosis. So we decided to escape to the country where he could do a lesser job working from home. The move would be good for us all. Certainly, it was good for him. Within two years, he felt so rejuvenated he left us for the woman who ran the local Post Office and moved with her to the Lake District. *You can keep the house*, he announced when he told me he was off. *I don't want to disrupt your lives*.

Well, thanks, Pete, but these days, with Finn, my life is a ceaseless bombardment of disruption, which is why I so often think about the walk. It's magical; I can see it clearly when I close my eyes. A precarious path tenaciously following the contours of a crystal-clear river that rushes and roars like an unleashed beast, its power replenished by numerous small waterfalls cascading down the towering granite crags that form the valley's flanks. Although vertiginous, these cliffs are thickly wooded with pine and beech, with just enough light filtering through to sustain an undergrowth of ivy, moss and ferns. All you can hear is the rushing water; all you can smell is damp loam and the indefinable tang of clean, virgin air. Stop and tilt your head back, and the sky seems a dream away. Not that I do that very often. On the path above the river, you might lose your balance and fall.

'It's my birthday today,' I announced to Finn this morning when eventually he emerged from his pit.

'Yeah,' he muttered, without even looking my way.

'No card?' I asked, wickedly determined not to let him off the hook.

He shrugged, 'Skint, aren't I?'

I told him it didn't matter. I lied. Of course, it mattered; it seared me like a branding iron. He couldn't even be bothered to draw me a picture and scrawl a message surrounded by kisses and love-hearts. Or pick me a bunch of wildflowers. He used to do that when he was

little and not just on my birthday. He did it to say, *I love you, Mum*. Because then, he did. These days I'm glad I've got those little notes as proof. There's no evidence of it otherwise. Having expected today's indifference, I was ready for him. 'Do you need some money, then?' I asked, my back to him, nonchalant.

'Yeah. Be good.'

'How much?'

'Twenny...?'

I gritted my teeth. *For what?* I wanted to say. But I already knew the answer: for cigarettes, hash, booze, crap food instead of the wholesome meals I cook that he pokes at and leaves on his plate.

'Okay. Tell you what, as it's my birthday and I've got the day off, I'll give you fifty if you do something for me.'

Silence.

'Come for a walk in Withecombe Woods; it'd be a delightful treat.'

He said nothing.

'Perhaps we might take a flask of coffee, some biscuits – have a little picnic? You used to like that.' I say this for my own benefit. It's my way of seeing how far I have to push things before he responds. Today he lets it pass.

'When?'

'Oh, I don't know. Two o'clock? Give us time for a good walk, and we'll still be back by five. Plenty of day left after that.' Left for what? For me to spend my birthday evening alone. And for you to retreat to your disgusting pit to do bugger-all before you get on your bike and head off in pursuit of people and activities I can't bear to think about. 'I take it you haven't got any other plans?'

'Nope.'

I looked right at him then: six feet tall, broad-shouldered, ruggedly good-looking. Despite the abuse he heaps upon his body, his physique's still impressive. He used to be a Junior Swimming Champion before Pete left home. Now, every time I study him I want to scream, *What is wrong with you? Dropped out of school, failed your exams, sacked from your bar job, lost your driving licence within the first month. STOP IT! GROW UP!* But I've done that. It doesn't work.

'Do you want dinner tonight?'

'Nah. Leave it.'

'Okay. See you at two then.'

He grunted, picked up the bowl of cereal and mug of coffee he'd made without asking if I'd like one, and left the room. *Happy Birthday, Mum!*

I do it all. Mindfulness, Meditation, Forest Bathing, Yoga. Anything to quell the incessant rage that bubbles inside me like a vat of molten tar. But sometimes, mind over matter isn't enough. I'm so full of undigested resentment I feel I could be physically sick. And now, I've had enough. I've decided that I can't wait any longer for him to grow out of it – I'm losing faith that he will – so I've got to engineer a change. For years I've nurtured the hope that there's still an underlying ember of affection in our relationship that might be rekindled; now I need to know I'm not wrong. So I'm going to apply some pressure to shock him into growing up. He was a lovely child; he can still become a decent man. If he cared about me once, he can again. Can't he?

I drove us to the edge of the woods; we said nothing on the way. We got out, and he matched my pace as we walked down the muddy track to the bridge across the river. I scanned the

scene; the water was high, wide, gushing over barely-concealed rocks. I knew that further upstream, where it's narrower, it'd be even more powerful.

On the other side of the bridge, where the path starts, there's only room to walk single file. 'You go first,' I told him. 'You're faster than me.'

He shrugged.

'Don't go too quickly, though; we are supposed to be together.' I made an effort to sound light-hearted; it was part of the plan. I needed him to be close to me, touching distance when we reached the right place.

We walked in silence for maybe half an hour. We were deep in the woods, and as predicted, we hadn't seen a soul. *Whatever happens here stays here, the truth will never be known.* When we were nearly there, at the spot I had in mind, I felt my chest tighten. *It'll be quick. But it has to be right.* My heart started to race, and I forced myself to take deep breaths; I had to stay calm. I knew what I wanted to achieve. For months, every time I've reached breaking point, I've thought about it.

It's time. We were there.

I glanced at the tumultuous river several yards beneath us: there was a chance that someone falling in there might not survive, but I was prepared to take the risk. Finn was mere feet ahead when I shouted his name. As he turned, frowning with irritation, I stepped into the void. At the precise moment my body connected with the rocks I saw him on the bank above me, his face a mask of raw horror and disbelief.

That was what I'd wanted to see. *That* was what mattered.

The last thing I registered was his scream: 'Mum!'

Later, the police told me that we'd both been swept downstream. I ended up caught by rocks, which is what I'd assumed might happen; fortunately my head was above water. I can hardly

recall it, but at some stage, in agony from a dislocated shoulder, I managed to drag myself onto the bank. Predictably, it was hours before anyone came looking for us, already dusk when a farmer spotted the empty car. They found me first, close to death from hypothermia; Finn was some distance away, having crawled out of the shallows, concussed and with a broken leg.

They continue to refer to it as *An accident*, and Finn and I have said nothing to dissuade them. It *was* accidental in as much as I never expected him to be in danger; all I'd wanted was that unguarded look on his face that told me he still cared. I was prepared to die if that's what it took, but I never meant him to be hurt.

We haven't spoken about what took place, and I wonder if we ever will. But I feel a new understanding between us which, if not exactly closeness, is at least a half-open door. Home alone after they discharged me, the emptiness was as all-consuming as that river, the silence equally deafening. But knowing what Finn did for me, it didn't pain me in the way it used to when he was physically here.

Finn will be in hospital another few days, so I said I'd take in some things for him. But just now when I went to his room, I found something truly shocking: papers confirming he'd been accepted for army training.

Next week he would have left home.

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