

I'd always hated the countryside; all those buzzing, biting, creeping things, nights so dark you think you've gone blind and nothing to do every day except sit and watch the grass die. No. Give me a city where diesel fumes coat your lips after a short walk and at every corner there is something to see and somewhere to go. You can walk alone, alongside hundreds of fellow drifters each in their individual universes, yet linked together, like a shoal of fish. At least in the city no one speaks. Here, if I'm out walking and I meet someone else I change direction. I can't bear to be the butt of someone's well-meaning but intrusive questions. You see, less than a week after our thirtieth wedding anniversary, I discovered my husband, James had been having an affair for two years with a woman called Donna. It still hurts. This move was supposed to be a fresh start.

'Give him another chance. You make such a good pair' my happily coupled friends advised before they hugged me and hurried back to their own versions of domestic bliss, as if whatever had afflicted us was contagious. Those who were single had a different opinion. 'Leave the bastard. Get what's going and tell him to shove his vows and eternity ring where the sun doesn't shine.' Or variations. That would mean having half of very little. Too many failed schemes.

But this time James had a new scheme which he was certain would work. It's called downsizing, isn't it? We'd sell up, buy a smaller place that needed a bit of work. With some land attached, or at least a big garden, we could be self-sufficient. We might even get a pig. It would be a new beginning he'd said as he wiped the tears from my face. Not everyone was as understanding.

'I can't bear the thought of you selling the home where I grew up' our daughter Lydia said, sniffing and dabbing at her eyes. 'It's got so many memories for me.'

That hadn't stopped her wanting to get away as soon as she had finished university. She'd understand one day. It was just a house. Only things with heart, head and guts are to be treasured. Not crap made of bricks and mortar, steel and plastic. And that was what I wanted; one final opportunity for James and I to revitalise the heart, head and guts of our marriage.

Lydia had come around eventually. She turned up one afternoon with a van to collect the rest of her possessions and to commandeer the pine table and chairs (too big for our new kitchen), the desk from the study (there was no study) and the king size bed from the guest room (it would be months before we could have anyone to stay). 'It must be the male menopause,' she said and giggled as she rolled up the duvet and two sets of bed linen. 'At least he isn't growing his hair long and riding off into the sunset on a Harley Davidson.' I stuffed the towels from the guest bathroom into a couple of bin bags. Maybe it would be better if he did and never came back. I didn't say that out loud. I didn't want people to hear the bitterness and anger that had displaced the blood in my veins. Besides James was so keen on *our new life*, as he called it, I wanted to believe it would all work out.

We bought Woodbine Cottage in September and moved in on January 10<sup>th</sup>. It was every town dweller's dream of a country cottage with a thatched roof, diamond latticed windows and a fireplace in every room. In reality, the thatch leaked, the windows let in gale force winds and all except one fireplace was blocked by decades of jackdaw nests. The one that did work smoked and acrid grey fumes billowed into the rooms whenever the wind veered from north west to north which it did at regular intervals throughout the winter. We squatted in two rooms, stretching our meagre savings to pay the local builders who were experts in the sharp intake of breath before mentioning eye watering sums of money. They sorted the electrics, the roof and the damp course. Everything else would have to wait or we'd tackle it ourselves.

Day after dreary dark winter's day we huddled together, plastering, painting and stripping the floorboards. Our faces were red with lime burns and our hair was permanently spattered with

white emulsion. James and I settled into what was more like a friendship. It would do for the moment. For three months we worked inside until one morning the sun burst through the grey clouds. I prised open the window in our bedroom window and leaned out. A blackbird was calling from the boughs of an apple tree, crooked and gnarled as an old man's legs. A swarm of midges hovered over the grass and the rich, damp smell of the warming earth announced spring was here.

It was time to tackle the overgrown garden. We cut down the brambles, cleared away the ancient fruit bushes and dug and raked the soil until it ran like sand between my fingers. We made huge bonfires and watched the plumes of sparks dance in the night air and light up the evening sky. I'd lean on the rake and listen to the crackle and roar as flames destroyed the past for the sake of what was still to come. In the evenings we studied the internet and read old books rescued from junk shops. We lay in bed and listened to the sorrowful hooting of the owls. I kept to my side. The thought of his hands touching me or even worse, his body pressing into mine made me want to retch. I could not forget the times he must have come from her bed to ours, his body still warm and damp. I'd hug the duvet and hold the pain deep inside me.

April came and we planted. James had a one-man war against the slugs and the snails. The garden was dotted with margarine containers filled with stale beer and trails of broken egg shells until he succumbed and bought a pack of electric blue pellets. It nuked the blighters in hours. Now there were days when the sun shone and I luxuriated in the pungent smell of the warm earth as I tended the small seedlings. Perhaps everyone was right and this was a second chance for both of us after all.

May arrived in a flurry of white blossom, like confetti. The cuckoo called till dusk fell and bats flittered around the thatch. One evening we were sitting in the kitchen after an unusually hot day. James was studying the costs of greenhouses. Next year he wanted to grow all our plants from seeds. I was searching for tips on preserving rhubarb as the two crowns we'd

found behind the shed were producing hundreds of spears. 'James, look at this.' It was a website about foods we could harvest for free that grew in the fields and hedgerows, right under our noses.

He came and sat next to me and scanned the introduction. 'I reckon we could save a lot of money here.' He read on. 'This is just your thing.' He tapped the tip of his finger on my nose and his face crinkled into the smile I used to know so well. 'You'd be brilliant at this.' I downloaded the guide.

That night as he reached out to me in the dark, I let his hands explore my body until we made love. It was his body and mine together again but somehow it wasn't. As he rolled off me, I wasn't certain if he knew it was me or if his mind was still with her. I had to trust. It was all I had left. That and hope.

The May blossom faded, the white heads of moon daisies peppered the verges and honeysuckle graced the hedgerows with its rich scent. I had identified and learnt the names of most of the local wild plants and flowers thanks to the little guide which I carried with me on my phone at all times. I knew where to gather crab apples for jelly. I found raspberries and tiny strawberries no bigger than a finger nail. I watched each day as the bramble flowers revealed small red fruits that within weeks would turn to black jewels to fill the freezer and provide fruit for our porridge throughout the winter, if we were careful. I drew the line at collecting mushrooms and fungi. They all looked evil. As the days lengthened, I felt our lives were slowly being repaired.

James told me about the job after yet another twenty-mile trip to the garden centre on the new industrial and retail site. It had a few start up tech businesses. I could never understand why James insisted on going there. Wasn't Homebase good enough? I was sitting in the shade of

the old apple tree while swallows ducked and dived to feed their young in the nest they had built in the porch roof.

‘I saw this advert for someone to work two days a week designing websites. I went in, met the CEO and they want me to start on Monday.’ He must have noticed my face. ‘It’s only two days a week and with the extra cash we can do some of the repairs earlier than planned.’ He knew how much I hated the plastic shower over the bath and the leaking kitchen taps. I agreed. Inevitably the two days became four, then five and on several occasions, he had to work very late to satisfy a *difficult customer*.

It was the phone message that made me just a bit suspicious. It signalled a text had arrived when James was out in the garden. I was washing up. I checked in case it was something important about his mother. She was very frail and we were always ready to leave at a moment’s notice if she fell ill.

*If I don't see you at work, same time, same place? D XXX*

James was leaning on the rake, staring into space when I handed him the phone.

‘Is it important?’

‘No.’ He ran a hand over his brow and left a dirty mark. ‘Just a message about work next week. There’s a new customer.’

‘Another difficult one?’ I asked as he shoved the phone into his pocket, a hint of blush spreading over his neck.

‘Every customer has their little ways and we try to accommodate them. I’ll go and water the borders at the front’ he said and picked up the hosepipe. He didn’t see me watching him as he texted a reply, the hose lying discarded on the lawn.

I had to drive past James' place of work after a trip to the town with a boot load of charity shop donations. I'd planned to surprise him and had packed a lunch of salad, our own tomatoes and homemade bread. As I turned into the car park, there she was, or someone very like her. I slammed on the brakes and swerved into the nearest empty space. I needed a better look. The woman was walking towards the bus stop. I clutched the wheel and choked back the bile that was rising in my throat. I pretended to check my appearance in the mirror. It really was Donna. I would know that face anywhere with her streaked hair, botoxed pout and fake tan. I slumped over the wheel, unable to take my eyes off her until the bus arrived and she climbed on. What was she doing? Had she followed us? Or is that why we had come here? The first tears fell and I brushed them away with the back of my hand. I sat still until the shaking had stopped and I could drive home. The promise of our fresh start had withered like a tender plant in an early frost. I would have to talk to James tonight. Whether he told the truth or lied, both would destroy all that we had built up together over the last few months. Had all this meant nothing to him? I was like a sleep walker for the rest of the day, trying to make sense of what I'd seen and trying and failing to block the recurring image of James with Donna.

I tried to act normally. When James came home that evening the food was ready. I listened as he gabbled on. All I could think about was Donna and why she was here. I took a deep breath. 'James, there's something I want to ask you.'

'What?'

I couldn't bring myself to reply so fudged a question about blackberries and the best time to pick them.

'Soon as you can' he said. 'My old nan used to say they were best before 30<sup>th</sup> September because that's when the Devil spits on them and makes them vile. Silly superstition. Everyone

knows that's when the sun is weaker and the plant can't make enough sugar.' He smirked his triumph of knowledge over my ignorance. 'Better get a move on.'

It was only when I was foraging for the blackberries the following day on a morning of mist, spangled cobwebs and damp leaves that I spotted something unusual. The berries were black but round and smooth, not knobbly like proper blackberries. The leaves were heart shaped and a few bell-shaped purple flowers remained. And it had no thorns. I thumbed through the foraging guide I always carried. It was Bella Donna. I'd never expected to see any growing here. It had got the name Beautiful Lady from the women who used it to make their eyes more seductive but it was as toxic as its country name of Deadly Night Shade. That's when I had my idea. It was perfect. I stripped most of the berries from the plant and covered them with proper blackberries. One berry looks like any other, doesn't it?

When James came home later that evening, he was delighted to find five large kilner jars of preserves and the kitchen full of the rich autumn smell of fruit and sugar. He took a pot and gazed at its jewel colours. 'Don't mind if I try these tomorrow, do you?'

I shook my head. 'It'll be a good idea to taste them in case I've made it over sweet.'

'Will do. Oh, the phone...sorry, must take this call and then you wanted to talk to me, didn't you?'

I stood up and moved towards the stairs. 'It'll wait. I'm going to bed.'

James was awake early. I could hear him humming in the kitchen. He was making porridge. I turned over in bed and pulled the pillow over my head. When I eventually went down stairs, I found James slumped in the chair, his phone in his hand. The half-written message was to Donna. He'd eaten porridge with nearly a whole jar of fruit. I called the ambulance. Too late.

The coroner recorded a verdict of accidental death and there was a stark warning in the local paper about the dangers to newcomers of country life and how no one should pick any fruit without being absolutely certain they knew what they were.

I sold the house and moved back to the city. I bought a small flat and joined a local choir. I have a manicure every week and my hair is a pale shade of grey with a blueish purple streak. I've taken up painting and with the profit from the sale of the bungalow and James' life insurance, I've booked a holiday or three. I might even get a tattoo of some blue berries with a heart shaped leaf. Sometimes a fresh start means just that; a complete change. Besides, I've always hated the countryside.