

ALEX

I woke before dawn trying to catch the shreds of my dream. Then I just lay, listening to the stream, loud after yesterday's rain, and watching the light slowly reveal the roof poles of the yurt. I thought about the day, about which part of the wood I'd visit, about having to go into the village to get supplies, but mostly I was thinking of Alex. How she came yesterday, while I was chopping wood, driving right up to the door of the yurt. There was someone in the truck with her but he didn't get out. She hadn't left much stuff, just a couple of bags of clothes, some books and her guitar. It didn't take her long to pack. Neither of us spoke till she was finished and then we just mumbled goodbyes and she was gone.

Before I came here I'd worried how it would be, living so isolated, without friends or distractions or electricity. The first few weeks I had a lot to do, setting up the yurt and insulating it for cold weather, sawing and chopping wood for the fire and the stove, making a compost toilet. I was excited to be here at last and itching to get going full time on the project. When I finally had everything in order I started spending the whole day in the woods. In the evenings I'd write up the day's observations, work on the rest of my thesis and dip into the boxes of books I'd brought. There were novels I'd always meant to read, books on the stars and clouds, books to teach myself knots and French. And of course my reference books: *Sterry's Complete British Wildlife*, *Godden's Butterflies* and my prize, the *New Atlas of British and Irish Flora*, bought the week before I came. But I was afraid that once the novelty passed I wouldn't be able to stick it out and that I'd want to escape back to town, or at least to the pub in the village every night. Yet the world outside this field and the woods had begun to fall away. I'd started to grow into the silence and into my own company, becoming aware of an inner presence that was new to me. Then Alex came.

She appeared late one afternoon when I'd just got back from the woods. I'd lain my leather bag of samples and notes down near the fire and was filling a kettle for tea when I heard, then saw, a battered green truck rumbling over the field. She jumped down from the cab and walked straight towards me.

“Hi, I’m Alex” she said, holding out her hand. “I think it’s brilliant what you’re doing here so I thought I’d come and take a look”. I caught a brown face and eyes and a direct gaze, was briefly aware of how she was a head shorter than me, and then I was watching her mouth and listening to her explain why she’d come. “I know lots of people record timings of flowers and birds but I hadn’t heard of anyone doing it like this till word came around about you. I just came to have a look”.

Alex was living on a farm in Gloucestershire and studying permaculture. She was doing a project on forest gardening which involved seeding nut, fruit and berry trees throughout the woods as a food source. She explained that one of the core principles of permaculture was not to intervene in any natural system without patient observation, ideally for a full cycle of the seasons, and it was something she wanted to learn more about.

She parked her truck by the great oak to get the morning shade, with the side door facing the yurt. Now she sat in the doorway in the late afternoon sun, playing her guitar and watching me while I worked around the camp and then made supper. We had rice and vegetables and scrambled egg by the fire and I got out my last bottle of wine. What with the evening chill and trying to find the one place the smoke didn’t choke us, we ended up sitting close together on the log, and when Alex fetched a blanket from her truck she draped it round us both. Her dreadlocks smelt of wood smoke over the musty odour of unwashed hair. She did most of the talking that night but I was happy to listen.

Alex was always animated. She was excited by her course, by the farm and the people on it and by permaculture. “Dan got us to do this thing on the first day” she told me. “You stand in a big circle and everyone chooses what animal or plant they want to be. I chose fox. Then you see what connections you have to the other animals and plants there and you run a piece of string between you. So I was connected to rabbit and vole and worm, because that’s what I eat, and rabbit was connected to grass and lots of wild plants. Oh and I didn’t say but it’s one really long piece of string that weaves between everyone, till you’ve got a whole web. Then you see what happens when you

take just one piece out of the web. One person lets go, even something that doesn't seem important, like wasp, and the whole web starts to collapse." She never said 'a fox' or 'a badger' or 'a rabbit'; it was always Fox, Badger, Rabbit like in a children's story. "And the other brilliant thing about permaculture is how it sees that humans are part of the web of life. Dan keeps saying that however well a system is designed, if it doesn't take account of the humans in it – their relationship – it can't be sustainable".

Later that night, when I laid the sheepskins out in the yurt and settled down to sleep, my mind was full of images of her face and her smell. I hadn't thought I wanted anyone there with me, but Alex seemed to make her own rules and I felt powerless to resist, even if I'd wanted to.

The next morning I was up early. The long grass was soaked with dew and trails of mist lingered in the hollows. Venus hung bright in the sky, above a low bank of cloud, and the hedgerow was vibrant with hawthorn blossoms and red campions. There were still embers in the fire pit from the oak I'd put on the night before. I fetched dry twigs and split birch from the yurt and arranged them in a pyramid over the coals, then crouched down and blew long and slow so that the embers glowed and flames licked the birch which crackled and spat as it caught. Then I took the tin bucket and my wash things to the dipping pool. The stream, which sprang from somewhere in the bracken strewn moors, was icy whatever the weather, but I'd come to relish the hard stones beneath my feet as I walked in up to my waist and the shock of ducking under.

I heard the truck door open and then Alex was by the pool in a thin robe, tousled hair, watching me. I remember feeling suddenly shy and I dipped under again and opened my eyes. In the brown water my limbs looked pale and elongated, tiny bubbles winking silver in the hair on my arms and legs. When I came up and turned back to Alex she was still standing there, smiling at me. Then she lifted off her robe in one swift movement. I caught a glimpse of a muscular body, small breasts and thatches of dark hair and with a shriek she was in the water. Alex was the most unselfconscious person I'd ever met when it came to nudity. Even that first morning she didn't get dressed for

ages, drying herself by the fire and squatting to make tea. She even did her yoga naked. After a while I started to relax about it too.

She came to the woods with me that day. I made sandwiches and packed water, cups, tea and my storm kettle which can boil water just with twigs, even in bad weather. I am used to moving quietly around in the woods or just sitting and waiting. I usually find a clearing with a stump or fallen trunk to sit on and note down my first sighting of everything and keep a count of numbers. The bluebells have mostly gone now but the cow parsley and hawthorn are in full blossom. There are butterflies, Clouded Yellows and Red Admirals, and damselflies and dragonflies where the wood meets the stream. I watch for the arrival and nesting of swallows and swifts, reed warblers and martins.

I was afraid Alex wouldn't keep still, would get restless and frighten off the birds and animals. And at first she did get really excited when we saw something, but she confined herself to animated expressions and smiles. Later, back at the camp, she sat quietly while I talked about what I'd learnt in the time I'd been here. I was two years into my PhD on the effect of climate change on native woodland and this was the largest piece of ancient forest in the South-West. It had taken months of struggle but I'd finally got the Woodland Trust to allow me to spend an entire year living here. I was hoping that once they saw that I was harmless I could negotiate a longer stay. That way, as the second full year came around, I could compare dates and see how the cycle might be changing. "My real dream is to blend in, to be another part of the ecosystem rather than just an onlooker. Quiet mind, no ego or desires, that kind of thing" and I laughed, a bit embarrassed.

I ended up talking for a long time. When I fell silent, Alex turned and looked full at me for a long while. "I love hearing you talk about your work. There's something peaceful and calming about it. It really grounds me".

That night she asked if she could sleep in the yurt with me. I mumbled something foolish like "Be my guest" and she undressed and slipped like an eel into my bed of sheepskins. I'd never been with anyone like Alex. She

writhed and laughed and squealed and I felt like a log in comparison. But she was so free and generous with her body, so warm, so full of little kisses, so trusting when she curled up against me to sleep that when I woke in the morning and saw her there I knew I was lost.

I don't remember ever being as happy as during the next few weeks. I'd usually wake before Alex and would just lie there, in whatever position the night had thrown us into, listening to her breathe. Sometimes I couldn't wait and would kiss her awake and we'd make love. I'd bring us tea in bed and we would start a conversation that flowed until late into the night when we were finally overtaken by sleep.

Alex was like a kid a lot of the time. She'd suddenly come up behind me and shout "catch" and jump so I'd have to grab her in a piggyback. If I caught her she tried to ride me around, pulling my ears to make me turn. But half the time we'd fall over and wrestle around, with Alex trying to make me surrender by tickling me. She wanted to play tag, or hide and seek, and splash me when we were at the pool. Some days we walked to the River Dart for a swim and she'd duck me, or pretend to be a shark and grab me underwater. But just as likely, at the oddest moments, she would come up and give me a gentle kiss. We also had our quiet times in the yurt. I would read to her by candlelight – she loved being read to - or I would write my notes and she would weave things out of leaves and wool and stones that she would hang in the trees. Or she would play her guitar. Most of her songs were about things like the Goddess, or the Eagle, or the Wind, but she knew a couple of others that I loved to listen to, one of them about a young woman pining for her true love who is taken off to war and is 'buried in a distant land'.

One Sunday Alex told me that she had a few things to sort out. "I'll be gone most of the day. I'll bring you back some goodies" and she kissed me goodbye. I'd got into the habit of taking Sundays off from my work and I climbed up to Bench Tor in the brilliant sunshine. Some days, when the world is warmed in a particular way and when I have walked hard, I feel as if every molecule of my body is nourished by a special air imbued with the essence of

the wind and the sun, heather and rock. And then my eyes see in a different way and everything is impossibly beautiful.

The granite outcrops of the Tor were full of flowers, and I stood for a long while on the very peak of the moor looking down at the gilded river winding through the valley. Then all of a sudden I felt such a pang of longing for Alex that I turned and retraced my steps rather than going home the long way by the river. She was not there when I got back and as I read, then cooked supper, I listened out for her truck. I fell asleep waiting. When I woke at dawn to find myself alone I thought she hadn't returned, but the truck was there. She must have got back late because she slept well into the morning. "I missed you. Why didn't you wake me"? I asked when Alex finally emerged. "I didn't see the point" she said, yawning. "It was really late. I wanted to make sure we both got a decent night's sleep".

A week or so later she went away again. I was coming back from the woods when I saw her carrying a small bag to the truck. I ran over and asked her where she was going. She wouldn't catch my eye and turned away, saying that she had to go back to the farm and see some people and would probably be back in a couple of days. Then she did look at me and said "I'm not too good with people keeping tabs on me" and drove off.

She was away for three nights. I threw myself into my work, spending most of the daylight hours in the wood. This work is really important. We assume that whatever we do, things will just stay the same. But if the climate really changes, everything we take for granted is also going to change. In the evenings I lay in bed and read Thoreau. But for once *Walden* failed to inspire me. The yurt, the camp, the woods that had begun to feel so vivid, now seemed flat and empty. One evening in the yurt I fell asleep with my face in one of her sweaters.

The night she came back I cooked pancakes for supper and lit incense in the yurt. She didn't say much about her trip and I didn't ask. I held her all night, not sleeping much. We soon slipped back into our old routine and Alex seemed loving enough but it wasn't the same. Before, on days when Alex

hadn't wanted to come into the woods with me, I'd been happy to go off on my own for hours. When I got back she'd be in the yurt, or by the fire, or in her truck, or in the hammock she'd slung amid the alders by the river, and she'd squeal "You're back" and throw herself at me. But now, after just a short while alone in the forest, I started to feel irritated and restless.

Everything, the plants, insects, birds and animals, seemed to have a purpose, and none cared or even noticed if I was there or not.

I began to slip back to the edge of the field just to check that Alex was there. One day when I went back the camp was empty. I guessed Alex had gone to the village. When she hadn't appeared after an hour or so I set off on the two mile walk down the road, hugging the verge as the cars hurtled by. There's nothing much in the village. Just a post office, a Tesco's, a pub and a church, and Alex wasn't in any of them.

She didn't get back till after dark. She'd been up on the moor. I said she could have left a note and that I was worried about her but she just laughed, saying she could look after herself. That night as I turned to her in bed she put a hand out to stop me. "Listen, no-one owns me", she said, and curled up away from me, right on the furthest edge of the bed. That's how we stayed all night.

I thought about it all in the woods the next day. I couldn't think about anything else. When I got back I made tea and asked her to come and sit by the fire. I told her I loved her, that I was crazy about her. "I want us to be together. I'll give up my PhD if you want. I can come and live with you on the farm so you can finish your course. We could live in the truck, or put the yurt up somewhere". She listened quietly and then just said "I don't think that's what I'm after" and got up and started washing pots and dishes.

It's hard not to keep replaying what happened later in the yurt. I was reading and Alex was sitting cross-legged, making one of her pieces, when she suddenly threw it down. "I can't stand this any longer" she said. "You just sit there looking at me with those hurt dog eyes all the time. And you're always following me around. I can't do anything without you tagging along, always

trying to touch me", and she jumped up, grabbed her blanket and left the yurt. I heard her truck door opening and closing and then silence.

I didn't get to sleep for hours, her words looping endlessly. When I went out in the morning the truck was gone. I tried to settle down to writing after that but in the end I went up onto the moors and walked for hours. I saw no-one, just sheep huddled against the rain. When I got back I lit the stove, ate some leftovers, drank too much wine and went to bed. I didn't see her again till she turned up yesterday to take her stuff.

I think it's going to be easier now she's taken her things. She wasn't here long, just a few weeks in all, and there are times now when I'm not thinking about her. My brother is coming to stay for a few days the week after next and I'm sure some friends will visit later in the summer. And as summer passes there will be lots to see, sloe berries and hazelnuts, acorns and beech mast, and all kinds of fungi.

In the end it was hunger that got me out of bed and out into the morning. I lit the fire, put in the trivet and took the pot I'd left to soak from yesterday's rice and washed it by the stream. I added water, oatmeal and salt and lifted it onto the trivet. My eyes smarting from the smoke, I stirred it till it thickened and placed it by the side of the fire, then took the bucket and my wash things to the pool. The stream flowed strong and cold after the rain and I stayed in the water till I was numb, then got out and towelled myself till my skin was on fire.

A movement in the corner of my eye made me stop. Just down stream a doe stepped on delicate feet amidst the tracery of young ash. Every sense attuned, it stood for a long while, but its gaze passed over me, and bending its neck it drank. I breathed slowly, frozen in the act of dressing, but either I moved slightly or something startled it and in a flash it was gone.