### **Rabbit**

I

Crack!

A rook fell from its treetop height, snapping small branches as it fell, bouncing from the larger ones. It hit the ground some yards away from the tree it had hovered over, after its zigzag free-fall of death.

Luther lifted the .22 to his shoulder once more. The rooks had not fled. They hovered still, panicking, shrieking their terrible din that filled the leaden skies and the small, dark copse.

Crack!

Another rook fell. This time, as it rebounded from one branch it clawed at another, pulling itself into the foliage, seeking sanctuary. Luther saw it, moved slightly forward as he reloaded, tracking it like a seasoned hunter. He took aim. The bird, not now hidden from sight, seemed to stare straight down into his focusing eye, daring him.

Crack!

The bird fell. This time, its neck broken and bloody, it plummeted straight to the ground. The rest of the rookery continued its raucous flapping up above the treetops, showing no inclination to put itself out of danger. They did not know it, but the danger had lapsed.

This was too easy. Such sport was not worthy of a great hunter. Luther lowered his sights, looking around the dense wood. Deep in the folds of darkness there would be a host of creatures that would not present themselves so invitingly, so foolishly. He saw nothing but the darkness, a daytime gloom peculiar to dense woods on grey, slightly rainy days.

He walked slowly, as he imagined hunters did, through the undergrowth, trying not to make a sound. His footfall was heavy, though, and unaccustomed to the environment he stumbled clumsily, reaching out with his left hand as he fell to the ground. As he settled on one knee, preventing himself from falling over completely, a creature rushed from the shrubbery before him. A large brown hare ran to safety as he fumbled with his rifle, raising it too late to its firing position. Speed, camouflage, stealth. A worthy adversary. There must be others, he thought, sitting there, watching him, listening for his next move, playing the game with him, playing their game.

He stood motionless, the gun poised by his right eye, trigger on the finger. The slight rain cooled his face and calmed his nerve. Then with a loud crash a creature raced from the darkness, right in front of him, crossing his path. He trailed it with the barrel of the gun, firing just as he had its head in his sights. The fearful scream tore into the air, shaking the trees and the shrubbery, which seemed to reel with terror. The creature screamed and screamed, a high pitched wail that needed no interpretation. He lowered the rifle, saw the large hare rolling in the tangled bushes, deranged with pain. He took aim again. Crack! He missed, piercing the bark of a large pine. His hand was shaking, his spirits jolted by the continuing wails and the sight of the mad creature, desperate for death. He reloaded. He aimed again. Crack! This time the shrieking stopped, suddenly, as the large round animal rolled to a stop at the foot of the tree.

Calmer now, he backed off a little, not wanting to see the result of his labour. He looked around, still edgy, though he could not say why. He gave a start when he realised that someone was watching him. Some thirty feet or more to his right stood a woman, wrapped up against the autumn squalls, her head covered by a black headscarf. He could swear that her skin was blue, but maybe it was the light, drained of every ounce of warmth as it filtered through the forest gloom. She was shouting at him, though her words were indistinct.

"Who do you think you are that you can come here and murder these creatures? You murderer! You evil vermin! I'll make sure you pay for this. Stop it now, you butcher!"

She shook her fist at him, standing still by a large tree.

He heard some of her words, and certainly gathered from the tone that the woman was angry, threatening even.

"Bugger off, you old faggot," he shouted back at her. "Can't a chap have a bit of fun, eh?"

She heard every word. Their accents betrayed a deep chasm between them, the woman's country burr seeming from an older time than Luther's urban drawl.

"Get yourself back where you belong, in all the grime and the exhaust fumes, go on, go and kill yourself in your stinking town. Leave us be with our animals and…"

"Get stuffed!" he exclaimed as he reloaded.

He aimed his rifle without commitment in her direction, laughing and shouting at her. She cowered, like a small child trying to avoid the blows of an aggressive parent. Perhaps she knew he would not fire at her. Perhaps she flinched for effect. But just as he took aim, over her head, he saw a squirrel saunter across the bough above her, not running, moving in that ghostly way of squirrels, stuttering occasionally as it sniffed the air, the bark, the leaves. Oh joy, another worthy target, a good mover, an adversary. This time he followed the creature's moves slowly with his barrel, choosing his moment, with the squirrel poised just above the meddlesome woman.

Crack!

As she jumped with fright, the squirrel dropped on her head from a mere two feet above her. She screamed, not knowing which way to run. Luther laughed, a stupid laugh developed in the bars and clubs of Balham, a drunken laugh. The woman looked down at the immobile, grey thing, spattered with blood, cried inconsolably, turned and fled. Luther just laughed and laughed.

II

"The thing is, we kill 'em, alright, but then we eat 'em."

Patch, a man younger than he looked, was explaining to Luther why the woman in the woods had been right to chastise him.

"And it don't do, really, just to kill 'em for the hell of it."

"Oh don't give me that," Luther rejoined. "You can't tell me that you don't go out with your rifle and take a few pot shots for fun. Everybody does it."

"Well, no, actually, everybody doesn't do it."

Patch was irritated, and his friends, sitting at the bar beside him, were looking away, nodding knowingly at each other. They had their view of townsfolk, and this one was just like all the rest. They know bloody everything. They even know what country people do with their lives, though they've rarely been out to the country. They're all bloody experts. The thoughts were well tested, on too many nights, in the bar of The Laughing Cavalier and though it went largely unsaid on this occasion, Luther being a large and physical man, it took no telepathy for each of these locals to know what the others were thinking.

So they edged away, starting separate conversations of their own, isolating Luther and Patch, who seemed trapped.

"I reckon I know the woman you mean, as well. You don't want to go upsetting her," Patch continued. "She's from a very old Standon Piltney family, much like your Lady Clarissa, only not quite so grand. They are the Radleys and it's best not to cross the Radleys, especially the women, eh guys?" He nodded to all and sundry.

"She upset me, the witch!"

"Now, now. There's no call for name-calling. She's only sticking up for what she believes in, and she has got a point, you know."

"Naw, all this save the whale or protect the panda stuff's okay in its place, I can see that. But rabbits and squirrels and rooks, for God's sake. They're vermin. They're everywhere, even in the towns and cities. Fair game, I say, specially for a bit of fun."

He slapped Patch on the shoulder, trying a bit of bonhomie to lighten the mood. It didn't work. Nor did the round of drinks he bought, though all were accepted.

It was the arrival of Clarissa, his girl friend and the reason for him being in this "God-forsaken rabbit warren", that eased things, but only a little. Her family were revered in the area, since old Sir Hampton Piltney had fought so gallantly for the King in the Civil War that still resonated in these parts, in street names, memorials, field names and even enmities between old families. Sir Hampton himself whose family had given the village part of its name had disappeared one night, riding down from London, and the loss of such a fighting hero was a double blow, first to the King, who needed all the help he could get, and then to the village, soon after rifled and pillaged by Cromwell's model troops.

"We'll make a country bumpkin of you yet," she said, turning from the door with a radiant smile. They kissed, she attempting a subtle peck, he grabbing her buttocks as he squeezed her close, letting her go only to turn to the barman and ask for a gin and tonic.

"No you bleedin' won't," he replied, as he took his change. "There's not a lot going on out here, is there? Not a lot of any interest, anyway. I like to be where the action is, as you well know. And the only action you can get here seems to be verboten."

The choice of word went down badly. Was he hinting they were Nazis? Was he just laying a general insult at their door? Did he want to provoke them all? The slight hush, even from people who had been holding their own conversations, was a worrying signal to Clarissa, who had not only a position to maintain but also friends in the village.

"Oh, come on Luther. I'm sure we could think of some action that's both permitted and fun. Anyway, what've you been up to, or shouldn't I ask?"

"I got a bit bored when you went to the estate office, sweetheart, so I borrowed your .22 and went out for a bit of sport."

"Oh dear. What sort of sport?"

The bar had filled up a little, and there were quite a few people listening in as Luther recounted his experiences of the afternoon. One of the newcomers, Jack Trim, stood up at one point, ostensibly to make his way to the toilet, but taking the opportunity to warn Luther.

"That woman's not to be trifled with, young man. None of us would do it, and we're from these parts. An outsider like you would be asking for trouble, believe me."

"You saying she's a witch or something, that she'll cast an evil spell on me?"

Luther asked this laughingly, increasing the already substantial disliking for him among the locals.

"I said no such thing. She's a Radley, and they've been here since before even the Piltneys. She knows a thing or two about the animals and the forces of nature that make this village and its farms and fields what they are. And as for her being an old woman, she's not much older than you, neither! That's all I'm saying and I'll say no more."

With that Jack Trim headed for the gents. Luther had adopted an expression of mock horror and seriousness, and had started to aim some words at the receding figure of Jack Trim: "A Radley, eh? I stand corrected, and humbled and cowed by…" but Clarissa thought better of it, picked up his leather jacket, thrust it over his arm and took his hand, heading for the door.

"Sorry about his city ways, you'll just have to forgive him," she said as she pushed him out the door. The tenor of parting glances seemed anything but forgiving.

"Load of old twaddle. I bet she is a friggin' witch. I bet she has potions and black cats and…"

"Luther, I live here. This is my home. These are…"

"Your people? Don't give me that. They're all peasants, that lot, stuck in the mumbo-jumbo-ages. I bet none of them went to school. And I bet half of them are shaggin' their sisters."

"Don't be silly. They're just people like any other."

The evening was not spoiled by the disagreeable episode in the pub. Luther's attention span allowed him to move on to more pleasurable things and Clarissa was not disappointed when she became the full focus of his interest. For all her finesse, her country manners and that indefinable "breeding" her father used to go on about so much when she was a girl, she had fallen strongly for this big, strong, muscular and faintly risky man. He was a good looker, with jet black hair, all of it except for a distinctive shock of bright white, like a plume on the right side of his forehead. His father and grandfather before him had been blessed both with sharp good looks and that shock of white hair. They were his only real inheritance, and he used them for all they were worth.

**III**

Clarissa had to work each day, despite Luther's visit. The estate had to be managed. This meant that she left shortly before nine in the morning and didn't return till mid to late afternoon. Luther's attempts to convince her that, just for these few days, she should take a rest, spend the time with him, were to no avail. He was left, therefore, to his own devices during the day time.

On the following morning, with the smell of hot coffee still lingering in the old house, although Clarissa had long left, Luther decided to explore the area a little. Despite the unpleasantness of the day before, he also decided to take Clarissa's gun, just in case some sport offered itself.

He sauntered through the village, down the damp High Street, the rifle jauntily resting over his shoulder. It was gloomy again and nearly all the houses and shops had lights on. The few people who were about took great pains to ignore Luther, despite his ironic "Good morning," said with mock forelock tugging and a city smile.

Luther took a turn by the Post Office and followed a narrow lane up a hill. He was soon out among the fields and woods and decided to climb a style, to get off the roadway and up into the thickets on the hilltop. His mind was distracted a little, fleetingly filled with thoughts of Clarissa, his Alpha Romeo, his flat in Upper Tooting, the little warehouse he'd just bought "south of the river", the base of his future business venture. He wandered aimlessly and unknowingly, arriving in an opening in the woods which seemed to be an ancient volcano, steeply dropping into a funnel shaped void, with black water swirling in its depths. The water's origins were also clear to see. A high waterfall on the far side roared, and he wondered why he had not heard it before arriving at this spot.

He stood gazing at the torrent of water, as it fell from its high hilltop river, much of it dashing a shelf of rock before leaping on its way into the volcanic pit. He wondered where it went from there. But his wondering was cut short when he realised he was not alone. She had not seen him. He was concealed from her by a large bush, through which he could, nevertheless, see her quite clearly. There on the shelf, naked to the cold and cleansing waterfall, arms outstretched, stood a woman. Her skin was white, almost translucent. Her hair was jet black and hanging long behind her. Her breasts were large and hung before her, water dripping from them in private little waterfalls. She knelt down, washing herself thoroughly in the pure water. Then she stood and made for the bank, not far from Luther's vantage point.

She picked up a large white towel, gathered her mass of long hair, wringing it as dry as she could, and began to rub down her body. She stopped suddenly and in the half darkness of the grey morning she looked straight into Luther's prying eyes. She stopped. The towel hung loosely in her right hand. Her face did not change its expression, neutral but pre-occupied. Luther thought of shouting to her, some expression of admiration for her beauty, or a suggestion of how they might spend the morning. He thought better of it, turned and began to walk back the way he had come.

Something disturbed him as he walked slowly through the trees away from the waterfall. He turned and looked back. The beautiful woman was towelling herself again, perhaps unaware that he was looking at her. He walked on. He turned again. Yes! He could swear that… No, that was too fanciful, stupid. He stared. It was true. This apparition, this country nymph, naked in the cold October morning air, had, just there on the right of her jet black hair, a plume, a shock of white, just like him, just like his dad, just like…

Luther resolved to broach this with her. His steps, back to the pool, took on a definite, purposeful gait. He gazed ahead of him, unable to take his eyes off her. She looked up, and seeing him walking so firmly towards her, she took fright, gathered her clothes and towel in her hands, turned and fled, up a hill towards a dense part of the wood.

"No. Don't run away. I don't mean you any harm. Hang on. Wait. I just want to talk to… I just want to ask… Please…"

The woman paid no attention. Soon she was lost from sight, where the trees thickened and the gloom darkened. Straining to see her, not paying full attention to the lie of the land around him, Luther fell, head first. The rifle jolted into his shoulder, causing him pain. In reaching out, he had jarred his left arm on a tree. His right ankle had twisted and he lay, face down, in a bush of thorns and sharp branches. His face scratched and bleeding, his arm, his ankle and his shoulder in pain, he rolled over in an attempt to sit upright in the foliage. Then he saw it. He froze. It did not take a countryman to know an animal trap when he saw one. This one, two curves of vicious, serrated steel set with a spring, ready to close at the slightest encouragement, just big enough to hold a rabbit, or a fox maybe, sat just by his left hand. His balance was difficult to maintain in this position. The natural line of fall would be on top of the trap. Carefully he eased his body weight to the other side and after minutes of careful jiggling and glancing at the hideous object, he rolled over to the right, falling again against the bole of a large tree.

Standing was difficult, painful, but he did it. He hobbled to the path and headed slowly back to the village, the rifle drooping now in his hand. The pain and his scratches might have distracted him, but he thought only of this extraordinary coincidence, this unexpected sight of the family plume, out here in the wilds of deepest darkest England. And so he did not notice the villagers looking at him, in his hobbling and bloodied state, as he made his way back to Clarissa's house. One youth even shouted at him: "Have the squirrels got their own back, then?" and he and his friends guffawed loudly. Luther was impervious.

**IV**

"Oh Luther, you must know by now that everybody gets to know everything about everyone else in a country village like this one."

Clarissa was explaining how she had heard of Luther's mishap, why she had hurried home in the early afternoon. She had found him soaking in a deep, sweet smelling bath, not, as she'd expected, feeling sorry for himself. Rather he had been deep in thought. In some ways, that was more worrying. It was so unlike Luther to think much about anything, or anything serious, at any rate.

"In that light, you could not possibly have made out a shock of hair, of any colour, let alone white."

"I did. I tell you I did. D'you know what it means?"

"It means you're mad!"

"No, no, seriously. It means that I've got a link with this place. A genetic link. There's family round here. Isn't that amazing?"

"It means that there's some brazen tart round here who dyes her hair. It's not that unfashionable to have a bit of blond in it, red even. And I still say…"

He turned over in the bath, causing a great tidal wave of soapy water to drench Clarissa's feet. With a gasp of exasperation she grabbed a towel and went into her bedroom. All this stuff about naked women in waterfalls - what waterfall anyway? She knew of no waterfalls round here. With jet black hair? Oh yes, he'd notice that all right, and not so much on her head - and a shock of white. Just too ridiculous for words.

With dry feet, she went back to the bathroom. Luther was sitting on the lid of the toilet, just about dry. She saw now just how marked was his face, and worried at the sudden jumps of pain as he moved his shoulder, or stood on his ankle.

"And you went out with my rifle again."

"Not for any reason. I just like it. It's a good feeling, you know, having the gun there just in case…"

"In case what?"

"I don't know. I'd love to have one in London. Wouldn't that be great, to be able to walk the streets of London with a rifle, just in case."

"I've put it in the store room. So leave it there, please. I'm quite frightened of what might happen if…"

He had put out his good arm, resting his hand between her thighs, fondling gently. She turned and sat astride him. She ran her fingers through the white puff of hair, an island in a sea of the thick black glossy mane. He lifted her long blue skirt, moved aside the narrow strip of cotton that protected her and lowered her gently on to him. All thought of the morning's adventure was lost.

**V**

Although it got dark quite early in the afternoon, Clarissa had to return to her estate office. The business she had interrupted to find out just what had happened to her lover-boy could not be left. Luther had no problem with that. This would give him a chance to seek out the beautiful woman of the waterfall. He walked out to the Range Rover with her, limping only slightly now.

When she had gone, Luther retrieved the rifle and a box of shells from the store room - "just in case," he said to himself. He bypassed the village, heading in the general direction he had taken that morning. He tramped over many fields, skirted various copses, entered several woods and thickets, but nowhere could he find the waterfall nor the volcanic pool. As he walked his pain eased and soon he was making good progress without pain.

It got darker and damper, and he was just about to give up, to turn round and try to find a way back, when he spotted, just visible in the dullness, a pale brown deer, chewing the grass at the base of a large tree. She looked up at him with her innocent eyes. She stopped chewing, seeming to stiffen every muscle in an attempt not to be seen. Luther looked all around him, slowly, carefully. This would be something, the deer hunter, the real, true-to-life countryman, rifleman, provider of meat, venison. "The thing is, we kill 'em, alright, but then we eat 'em." Patch's very words. He'd know how to butcher this creature, prepare it for roasting. He'd see Patch all right, and some of the others, perhaps. Tons of meat on this.

Slowly Luther raised the rifle to his shoulder. He took careful, steady aim. He paused, seeing the doleful face in the darkness, its big eyes knowing and accusing.

Crack!

Missed. The deer bounded in one huge leap beyond the surrounding shrubbery, zigzagging away through the bushes with Luther firing and reloading quickly, missing by more and more each time until the animal was lost to view. Rage grew in him, a rage that he could not explain. He turned, cursing the darkness, banging his rifle on the stump of a tree.

"You'll never learn, will you, you horrible man. Why don't you get out of this place, get back where you and your like belong!"

Luther jumped. The Radley woman, just two or three hundred yards away, shaking her fist at him, laughing at him for missing such a big target, shouted and shouted. She had her head scarf pulled tightly round her head, which emphasised the roundness of her face and the billowing, black cloak she wore made her look like some ancient sylvan spirit.

"Just go! Just get out of our village, out of our fields and woods. They're not for the likes of you!"

Luther loaded, in a rage, fired at the tree beside her. The wood split with a crack. The woman leaped in the other direction and started to run. He fired again, hitting the ground in front of her. She was screaming now, her threats uttered in a voice full of fear.

He let her run on, tiring of her noise.

"Stupid crone! One of these days I really will blow your head off!"

The anger was still there. He took up the rifle again, ranging around in the near darkness, hoping for something to move. Yes, over there, a small thing at great speed. Crack! A scream. Silence. Luther reloaded, fired again, wildly shooting everywhere he could. He knew he'd hit some of the creatures hidden there in the undergrowth. Thought they'd be safe there, eh? He reloaded, fired again, and again, and again. When the box was empty, he stopped, sat on a large tree root and hung his head.

**VI**

Clarissa had returned late and tired. Luther was sitting by the stereo, sampling her collection. He did not share her taste, but he had found a CD of Catatonia, and had played it over and over.

"Who's is this?" he asked.

"Not mine. It must belong to Sheila, the clerk in the office. She did lend me some stuff, thought I could be converted to "modern music". I thought I'd given it all back."

"It's good. I don't think it fits in with this Bach stuff, though. Did you like it?"

"No."

"Oh well, at least you know your mind."

"So much so that I'm going to bed. Today's been eventful for me, and I'm corpsed. Oh, would you do me a favour and bring in the washing I put on the line this morning? It's probably got damp now in the evening dew. I just forgot all about it earlier on or I'd have…"

"Yeh, no problem."

Luther walked slowly out into the kitchen. When he turned on the light, the bulb died with a "spat!" The light from the kitchen was normally enough to see by in the long garden. No matter. He opened the back door and made for the washing line at the far end of the long lawn. He could make out the outline of the washing on the line, just a few things, the odd t-shirt, slacks, knickers, socks.

He lowered the prop and started to un-peg the clothes. A gust of wind blew through the trees around him. He gave a start, as the wind had come from nowhere in what had been a calm if damp evening. He worked his way slowly along the line. He turned suddenly when he thought he heard someone behind him. It was very dark now in the garden, a remote upstairs light from the house the only intimation that he had not gone too far. Silly, getting jumpy in the dark, like when he was a little boy. Stop it!

Luther put the few items he had gathered over his arm and continued with his chore. Then he heard a voice, he was sure he heard a voice, just there in front of him in what would be a line of trees bordering Clarissa's garden. He stopped, though his pulse beat loud enough for him to hear the regular thudding in his ears. His heart raced. Then he heard it again. He could not make out what was said.

"Who's there?"

Then he heard what seemed to be more than one voice, several voices, whispering, whispering loud but incoherently, over there in the trees, no over there by the shed in the corner of the garden, no, over here by the bird bath. And scurrying, movement sensed not seen around him in the grass, in the trees, along the branches. The whispering swirled around him. He backed off from the washing line, his task half finished. Something flew through the night air, brushing his hair, making him duck. He dropped the clothes on the lawn, and as he stumbled to pick them up he saw the eyes, picked out in pin pricks of light around him, staring at him, piercingly, tellingly, some moving around him, some fixed. And the whispers, now over on his right, a little clearer, the odd word brimming through: "Punish. Punish. Evil. Been warned. Been warned. Punish."

In a sweat, Luther grabbed the clothes and ran for the kitchen door. The creatures moved too, some getting in front of him, squealing as he trod on them, some flying at him from high in the trees, skimming past his head, pecking at his neck. He fell and was filled with an immense fear as he felt the swarm closing over him. He forced himself up on his feet and ran further, further, kicking the little animals away from in front of him. When he reached the door he slammed it shut with a mixture of panic and relief as the cacophony continued on the other side, banging the door, whispering their oaths and imprecations.

And suddenly it stopped. Silence. Silence as he stood there, back to the door in the semi-darkness, damp clothes draped over his arm. Then one short sentence from outside the door: "We will get you," uttered in a high whisper. And silence again.

During the hours that he sat there in the armchair, whisky in his glass, staring at the floor, knowing that the doors were all bolted, the windows all shut tight, he could easily convince himself that it had not happened. He thought at one point that he was going mad, or perhaps that some of the villagers were playing a trick, or… Or what? Clarissa was sound asleep and he had decided not to wake her. This was too silly. Too silly. He drained his glass and went up to her bed. He climbed in carefully, snuggled up to her and fell into a deep sleep.

**VII**

The bleak sunlight that woke him mid-morning gave the bedroom an eerie, unsettled feel. The autumn would soon give way to winter and there was a transitional aspect to the landscape he could see from the window, and a sense of change all around him.

Clarissa had not woken him when she left for work. He had determined as he lay in the morning light that he would leave today. Best just go, leave a note, be in touch, that sort of thing. But he did not want to lose this relationship. Perhaps it would be like the rest, short-lived, doomed to failure, but at least for the moment he felt good about it.

Which was more than he could say about this wretched place and the people and things in it. He'd never come here again, that's for sure, family links or no family links. That was no big deal, really was it? Nevertheless, he'd really like to know, you know, just who that woman was, and how she came to have the family hair. He had been sure that this was unique to him and his and to see it on another, a stranger, in such a remote spot, this unnerved him, left him asking questions when he was simply not normally the inquisitive type.

He showered, shaved and dressed. Leaving the house, this time without the gun that had caused him so much trouble, he made quickly for the village. The lane seemed longer than the day before, but clearly it was not. Why did he feel compelled to look over his shoulder, this way, now that way, as he walked along the lane? He had that uneasy, indeterminate instinct of being followed. Silly. He shrugged it off. Then he heard noises, scurryings, tiny squeaks and squawks, indistinct but unmistakeable. There was nothing there. He knew that, because he kept a constant vigil, over this hedge, across that field, into that thicket.

When he reached the village proper, he felt safer. He turned around, to look up the lane. Two small creatures, he couldn't tell what they were, stopped on the brow of the hill, looking in his direction. Silly, they're just there. Nothing to do with him.

As he walked down the High Street towards the village store he was taken aback when a grey squirrel raced out from between two houses on his right, just in front of him, not hesitating, simply racing for dear life across the road. Did they do that, squirrels? Did they come into the village? Of course they must. Of course they did.

Two ravens flew menacingly, he felt, on to the telegraph wires that led from the store, sat there silently, seemed to be watching him. "Menacingly?" he asked himself. "Why menacingly? They're just there. They're just ravens sitting on telegraph wires. It's what they do." But as he reached the door of the shop, just as he turned to notice the Radley woman staring at him from the village cross, the ravens swooped and pecked at him, causing him to fall into the doorway, making a loud clatter as he entered.

"A pint of milk and a loaf of bread, please."

He did his shopping, eliciting barely a word from the girl who served him. There were two or three villagers in the shop, and they made it clear that they were ignoring him quite deliberately. Pathetic, he thought. But he needed to know something, so he tried to draw the shop girl into conversation.

"See my hair?"

It was, he supposed, an odd thing to say. The girl seemed startled.

"No, don't worry, this might seem daft, but… Do you see that I have this white bit in my hair?"

The girl nodded, her face a picture of anxiety. The villagers were all staring from their safe distance behind the beans, by the cheese counter, beside the bread.

"Have you ever seen anything like that in the village?"

"Badger?" she ventured almost incoherently. She coughed. "Badger?" she repeated, a little more boldly.

"No, no." He couldn't laugh, however absurd the conversation had become. He looked over at the villagers. They looked away quickly.

"I mean, have you ever seen a villager, one of your own people, with hair like this?"

"No, sir. I've never seen hair like that before in my life."

"Nor have we, very odd, if you ask us."

Was this woman speaking for all of them? It seemed so. This was getting him nowhere. He addressed the shop at large.

"Are you sure there's no one in your village with hair like this?"

"We are very sure," replied the same spokeswoman, emphatically, decisively.

Luther paid and left the store. Over on the village green he saw a small group of rabbits playing, rolling and running around. He seemed relieved at what was, apparently, a common sight in this village. The ravens had gone, though there were other birds flying around. Normal. So normal. He turned to head back to Clarissa's house. From the corner of his eye, he saw the rabbits stop. He looked over to the green. They had all stopped their play. They sat there, looking at him. Yes, they were all looking exactly at him, over the hundred yards or so between them, straight at him.

He turned up the street and ran. He ran as fast as he could, giving no time for any of his fears to assail him, not looking at the hedges, the fields, the woods, running blind till he arrived, breathless and sweating at the door of Clarissa's house. He looked around. Nothing. Just normal, late autumn things, bare branches, leaves on the ground, thin sunlight, a slight, cool, damp breeze.

Before going into the house he opened up the garage, where he had put his beloved Alpha Romeo when he had arrived. He backed her out, ready for his getaway. Just a little packing, a note for Clarissa. Maybe he should phone her?

**VIII**

"It's for you, Clarissa. Luther."

Clarissa took the phone.

"Oh you're up, then, lazy lump."

"What? Oh, yes. I'm up. You know me."

"Yes, I do!"

"Listen, silly question but…"

"Go on, I can't talk long, things are busy here."

"Which do you prefer, squirrels, ravens or rabbits?"

She was used to his senseless questions, but did he have to phone her here, today of all days, salaries and stuff, with this nonsense?

"Oh God, Luther, I'm right up to my neck…"

"No, go on, humour me. Which do you prefer?"

"Oh, bloody rabbits I suppose, now clear off. I'll see you later."

"What was that all about?"

"I've no idea, Sheila. He's very odd, sometimes. But sweet. To tell the truth, I think he's ruffled a few feathers in the village, and no mistake."

**IX**

Luther's bag was nearly packed, just the washing stuff, razor and things. He went into the bathroom leading from Clarissa's bedroom. As he gathered his things he looked from the window. There on the other side of the lane stood the Radley woman, her head scarf pulled tight around her face, her flowing black cape giving her the air of some unearthly being.

"Oh no." He hurried back to the bedroom, piling his wash things into his carry-all. When he glanced out of the window, the woman had gone. He felt a sense of relief, as if he'd been given a moment to… to what? To flee?

He left the bedroom, raced down stairs and was pulled up short as he saw from the back window, over there in the field behind the house, what he thought was the beautiful woman from the waterfall. He dropped his bag. He must know. He must ask her. She was looking over at the house. When she raised an arm, beckoning him, twice, three times, he felt sure what he must do. He ran for the back door, tore it open and raced down the garden. He could see that she had started to walk away, towards the woods. Never mind, he would catch up with her, no mistake. He ran, leapt the fence at the end of the garden, kept running. The woman walked on slowly, turning to hurry him on from time to time, but he seemed to get no nearer, no matter how fast he ran.

She entered the wood as Luther ran awkwardly over a ploughed field. Though this slowed him, he could see that she was waiting for him, beckoning, smiling. The white plume of hair was clearly visible among the black, even from this distance. He would know the answer to his question before heading back to London.

Within a short while Luther stood in the wood, right beside the waterfall and its volcanic pit, just a hundred yards from the beautiful, black-haired woman. He could see her face now very clearly, how pale and lovely she was. He could see the rich pattern on her deep blue dress, and above all he could see the rich, long black hair with its white plume, dazzling, brighter than ever even in this gloomy place.

Just as he opened his mouth, to ask the question he had come to ask, the woman bent down into a shrub and pulled out a large black cloak and a head scarf. In no time she had transformed herself into a hideous crone, scolding and forbidding, pointing a long bony finger at him.

"Now it's time for you to pay."

She did not shout these words. Though Luther was walking unsteadily backwards, startled by the transformation, he heard them.

"What do you think you can do to me?" Luther blurted, wishing he had the gun with him.

"You'd be amazed what I can do."

"I don't think so."

Luther was walking backwards, still unsteadily. She approached him at the same rate.

"I don't think so," she repeated, using Luther's own voice. He stopped, puzzled and shocked at hearing his own voice coming from her mouth. She continued, still in his voice.

"What do you think you can do to me? I don't think so. Which do you prefer, squirrels, ravens or rabbits?"

"What are you talking about?"

He started moving again, slowly.

"Which do you prefer, squirrels, ravens or rabbits?"

"You're mad."

"I'm very mad. I'm very mad."

Luther turned and fled. Some of the thin sunlight filtered through to the wood, allowing him to see a clear trail on the other side of a large but sparse bush. As he ran for the bush, the woman screamed with laughter, watching him flee. Her screaming almost drowned the sudden squawk of birds and animals that fled from the bush as Luther threw himself into it. From the other side a small, frightened rabbit scurried from the wood. The hideous laughter chased the rabbit as he made for the ploughed field, his four little black legs pumping like pistons, his heart bursting with fear and confusion. Luther was nowhere to be seen.

**X**

Clarissa had left her office with some foreboding. She had been troubled by Luther's voice on the phone, the question that she barely understood. What had he meant? Was he getting her a present? That must be it. He was getting her something before he left tomorrow. But what sort of present could it possibly be? A raven? A squirrel? A rabbit? What was that all about. And what had she said, anyway? Oh yes, a rabbit.

"Oh well, I suppose I'm going to find out pretty soon."

The Range Rover turned into the drive. She was a little surprised to see Luther's Alpha in front of the house. He'd said he'd leave it locked away while he was staying. Can't trust these locals, apparently.

She was equally surprised, and dismayed, to see the front door wide open. It was getting dark now, but there were no lights on in the house. She switched the lights on in the large hall. She could see that the kitchen door was also wide open, and she felt a little afraid.

"Luther. Luther, are you in?"

Clarissa ran up the stairs, putting on lights in each room, finding the place empty. She heard a scuffling noise downstairs and hurried into the hall, catching sight of a black rabbit dashing across the kitchen, first this way, now that. When she went into the kitchen, the rabbit became calmer, looking up at her, imploringly.

"Oh, you poor thing. You're lost, aren't you? Don't worry, I'll help you get home."

Her soothing voice kept the creature calm, and he did not struggle as she picked him up, stroking him softly.

Clarissa noticed a little white patch, right on the rabbit's forehead, "Just like Luther's," she thought, and smiled. Then she thought of Luther again, wondering where on earth he could be.

The rabbit lay there in her arms, too terrified to move any more. Clarissa continued to stroke him and felt his heartbeat slow down as he relaxed.

A knock at the door startled them both, and she felt the rabbit's heart begin to beat quickly again. Clarissa put him down on the floor, closed the back door and went to answer the knock at the front.

"Hello, I hope you can help me."

It was the Radley woman. Clarissa had of course seen her many times, both as a girl and as a woman, but she had barely exchanged more than a polite nod in the past.

"In what way?"

"I've lost my little pet rabbit, a dear little thing, and someone told me he ran this way, into your garden. Have you seen him?"

"Oh, er, can you describe him?"

"Black, very black, with a little white patch on his brow, just here."

There was no mistaking the little animal she had in her kitchen,

"Yes. I have it. It ran into my kitchen. I'll just go and get it for you," she said, leaving the woman at the front door.

Clarissa felt sad. She'd only just met the rabbit, and it probably did belong to this woman she thought, but she did not really want to give him up. Silly! She went slowly to the kitchen, picked the rabbit up and walked back to the door. She could feel his little heart pounding away.

"Don't be frightened. Your owner's here to take you home."

The woman stood at the door. She had a cage in her hands now, with a spring door, held open by one hand.

"That's very kind of you. Can you just squeeze him in there, through the little door?"

Clarissa tried, but she could not get the rabbit into the door. The woman got a little angry, impatient with Clarissa, irritated by her fumbling efforts.

"Oh never mind, I'll carry him. Perhaps I can leave the cage here and pick it up tomorrow."

She put the cage down and turned to take the rabbit. When he was in her hands the woman walked away, stroking him gently, murmuring to him: "There there, Luther, mummy's here. Safe now."

"What did you call him?" Clarissa blurted. "Did you call him Luther?"

The woman ignored her and tried to speed her walk.

"Wait. You called him Luther. What did you mean? Do you know Luther? Do you know where he is?"

The woman turned on Clarissa with a hideous laugh.

"Know where he is? Know where he is? I should say I know where he is!"

Clarissa caught up with her, tried to catch her arm. The woman shrugged her off, unsettling the rabbit a little. He seized his moment and leapt for all he was worth out of his captor's hands, on to the drive, and hurtled round the corner of the house. Clarissa gave a frightened start.

"What's happening, what's going on. I don't understand."

"Oh don't you, dear? Well never mind. I have a lovely surprise for him round in your back garden. I put it there just in case this happened."

She laughed again, a subdued but hideous snigger, almost a snort. Her laughter was interrupted by the most awful scream, high and penetrating, unending, that came from the back of the house.

Clarissa ran through the house and out through the kitchen door. She screamed as she saw the little black rabbit clamped in a vicious trap, the serrated blades cutting more deeply into him the more he struggled. He screamed and screamed. Clarissa almost fainted, then came to, realising that she could only do one thing to help him, to help the tortured rabbit.

She ran into the kitchen, opened the store room and took out the rifle. She loaded it and quickly and calmly went out to the garden. She took aim as the writhing rabbit seemed to beseech her with his eyes, his black fur scarred with blood and flesh, his white blaze muddied and dirty with blood.

Crack!

Suddenly he lay dead. Clarissa fell to the ground, propped up with her rifle. She sat looking at this poor, dead little rabbit.

"What have you done?" Clarissa asked the Radley woman through her sobs and tears.

"What have I done? Well between us we have restored the balance of nature," the

woman replied and she ran off.

The following days were the worst of her life for Clarissa. She felt more deeply than she understood why the loss of the little black rabbit with the white plume in its fur.

Her mind was tormented by her memory of the return to her cottage on that eventful day. Scenes from that experience played through her consciousness. Had the Radley woman really called the rabbit Luther? On asking her where Luther was she had, worryingly, replied, "I should say I know where he is," but had given nothing away. And what had she meant by claiming that she and Clarissa had "restored the balance of nature?"

Her worst image was the replay, over and over, of the rifle shot Clarissa had fired to despatch the frightened rabbit.

Her tortured imagination began to invest the Radley woman with unearthly powers, the like of which were only whispered in "The Laughing Cavalier" among the more simple minded of the clientèle.

Clarissa took some time off work to try to pull herself together. She moped about the place as if she were recovering from some serious illness. When she woke on the fourth day she was alarmed to discover when she left her house that Luther's Alfa Romeo had gone. She could not fathom its disappearance and the local police were little help. Sergeant Pendleton was dogmatically certain that her boyfriend must have decided to "do a runner", to get away from the place he loathed so much. He had heard all the rumours in the village and this was his decisive conclusion.

"He'll be in London, missy, where he belongs. Best look for him there." End of conversation!

For some days Clarissa tried over and over to get hold of Luther on his mobile phone. It was as if his phone had simply died. She soon reached the point where she dimply decided to get on with her life. Luther was, she decided, simply fickle. He must have decided to cut and run.

One part of her "getting on with her life" was to get back to work. This proved successful to a point and the distractions afforded her by her daily tasks kept her sane.

Another part was to pop into "The Laughing Cavalier" for a drink and to mingle with the people who had known her all her life, who knew the place and her best. On the first visit to the pub she found a handful of just these people in the snug, including Patch and Jack Trim who were deep in conversation. She stood by them, eager to join in their chat.

"I did say," Jack Trim was confiding, "that the Radley woman was not to be trifled with. The outsider was asking for trouble from the start. I warned him that she knew a thing or two about animals and the forces of nature around here."

Patch nodded as Jack spoke. He turned to Clarissa. "You told us we just had to forgive him, Clarry, but we didn't, did we? And the Radley woman didn't either. That's obvious."

"I don't think we'll find him anywhere on the planet, Clarry," added another of the regulars who had been listening in. "No she's done for him good and proper."

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