Saving Lovely Lady

The postman woke me early, again. I’m sure he purposely rattles the letterbox. He’s off my Christmas card list; I haven’t forgiven him for practically destroying Lovely Lady. I suppose I shouldn’t complain, he is the only person who comes to the house at the moment, even though we rarely have occasion to speak, unless he’s got a parcel for me.

I open my bedroom curtains; disappointingly it’s dull, the sky overcast. The sun is trying to break through a cloud that resembles a lion’s head. Slivers of buttery yellow sunlight scamper around its mane, teased into thin tendrils trailing behind it, as if the lion is running. The head morphs into a horseless cart, the wheels fall away, a surfboard remains pitching in a squally sea. I remember days like this, when I would lie on my back and observe clouds changing shape, like watching picture slides on a magic lantern. Somersaulting as they drifted over fields, casting shade until the sun poked through to spread a golden blanket over the ground. I remember days when everything around me was silent, apart from the susurration of the wind in the willow trees, their leaves dipping in and out of ditches as their boughs swayed, and the whizz of sycamore seeds as they propelled to earth seeking a small cranny in which to propagate.

In those days the disharmony of modern life was not there, it didn’t need to be discarded like a plastic water bottle. Water came from a tap and we got threepence back on a bottle of *Tizer*, our weekly treat. We took pleasure from very little in those days. Noise pollution consisted of the guttural sound of moving tractors, the mooing of cows ushered into the barn for milking, the rattle of wheels on steel track and the whooshing of steam as an engine trailed smoke, the colour of storm clouds. In those days I thought the World had forgotten me. I roamed as free as any wild animal until it was time for dinner. No-one worried, there weren’t mobile phones with tracking devices, we could go where we liked. What was the worst that could happen, a scraped knee, or scratched hands as we picked blackberries?

Peace was not forced then as it is today, as it has been for twelve months, longer than the gestation period of a human foetus. Perhaps it will take longer than the maturation period of an African Elephant before the Earth turns again. I will not mind. I have not missed much, save for the spontaneity to visit friends, to dress up not down, to holiday in a foreign place that upsets my stomach, because the tap water is not drinkable. In those days our house had one coal fire in the living room. In winter there was frost inside our single glazed windows, our toothbrushes iced to their beakers. I have not missed going to the pub, nor the revellers wending their way home after one too many, their voices magnified in the stillness of the night, fragments of their conversations sliding into my dreams through the open window.

At night, when sleep ran away from me faster than I could catch it, I watched shadows slink around my childhood bedroom. Imagined monsters lived underneath the bed, or were tucked inside one of the drawers in the bow fronted dresser, a family heirloom. I used to think I could hear wolves. A railway line separated our house from the moors, what would stop those wolves crossing the track? I visualised them hunting for food, their howls echoing across fields. I lay too terrified to move in case they heard my blankets fall to the floor; a little girl might make a delicious supper, tastier than a grandmother. Once sated their cries stopped. In my mind, I saw fresh blood dripping from their mouths, staining their paws. I would slip under my eiderdown shivering, I did not want bloodstained paw prints on my nightdress.

As soon as the sun began its morning ascent, light filtered through my unlined curtains. I would wait for the house to come alive with the frenzied activity of family life. ‘I heard the wolves again last night,’ I’d say to my mother. She always laughed and told me there were no wolves. There never were wolves on the moors, no wolves in these parts. She said they had once been in Wales, but that was hundreds of years ago, before they became extinct. Wales is just across the river Severn, wolves can swim. What if a couple of them survived extinction, surely nothing is impossible? It might have taken them a few days to make the journey, they could be living the other side of the track.

The possibility of wolves inhabiting my playground did not stop me from venturing across the fields in daylight, climbing over padlocked gates, crossing leech filled ditches. One of the boys on the estate got a leech on his arm once. He said the only way to get it off was to put a lighted cigarette on it, we were not yet teenagers, none of us smoked. I don’t remember how he got it off, we were terrified he’d drop down dead through loss of blood. I collected frog spawn and sticklebacks in jam-jars. In fields littered with cow pats, I picked bunches of *cardamine pratensis*, weeds we called milk maids, because the petals looked like a milk maids bonnet. They were never put into vases and placed on the dining room table, but left in jars filled with water and put on the rockery stones. Even if they were worth nothing else, their fragrance attracted bees.

Life was very simple then, and half a century later, so it has become again. In this new place I call home, sleep still evades me. I listen to owls, their home is in the branches of the oak tree in the garden opposite. It’s a big garden with the remnants of a tree plantation at the front bordering the road. The oak is old and large, almost twice as tall as my house with a girth as large as a giant’s leg. I lie in bed listening to the tune the wind plays on a penny whistle and the rustle of the Oak’s leaves. It is home to Owls, pigeons and blackbirds, Squirrels nest in hollows in its trunk. I think of the oak as an animal lodge, a hotel for the homeless, and after summer, when green leaves turn to brown and become as dry as chapped hands, they float to the ground where I collect them and turn them into fertilizer.

I heard foxes last night, their cries sound bewilderingly like children screaming, their bark not quite dog-like. The other morning, while I took my allowed exercise, I followed a trail of speckled feathers thinking a fox had had a good breakfast, until I saw the owl squashed as flat as card on the road, I knew its death was man-made. There are fewer cars on the road now, most people work from home. It only takes one car to make the hit, another to make it flat.

Still admiring the view of the garden opposite I see something move, glimpses of it show through the gaps in the hawthorn hedge. I didn’t know the doctor had a dog, perhaps it’s a companion now that his wife has gone. It’s big, a Great Dane or a Deer Hound, larger than a Labrador. Then the doctor comes bounding along the path after the dog, his brilliant white shirt noticeable through gaps in the foliage. I suppose the dog has escaped and go downstairs to see if I can help, but what I could do faced with a dog that size, I have no clue. When I open my front door, a few feet away from me is no dog, but a frightened fallow deer. She has strayed beyond her usual margin to feast on *Michelin* style food from my garden, instead of the roadside café openly available to her.

I have seen deer in the fields bordering the village which is also home to rabbits and badgers. Once they would have roamed as free spirits, but as our human civilisations have encroached on their homes, so they have adapted and seem to be able to live comfortably among what is not quite suburbia. And now the stillness this epidemic has forced us to live in, has made them brave, but stupidity can walk hand in hand with bravery. I have seen more than one dead fawn along the road to the quarry.

I pray the doctor will not come across the road, she is scared and I do not want her to injure herself, or me. Her nose twitches, as if she is reminded of some sweetmeat she has plucked from a bush. I believe it is her who has nibbled the bark of my mother’s remembrance rose: Lovely Lady, selected for its fragrant, soft pink flowers, pretty, like my mother. I blamed the postman when I’d seen one of the branches broken, lying prone on the ground as if it had been hit by a bus. I am pleased to have found my culprit, it puts my mind at rest. I won’t apologise about accusing the postman of using the fence between my neighbour and I as a short cut, because he did drop a box marked *fragile* on my hall floor a few weeks ago.

Rotating her large ears, the deer listens for sound simultaneously from the front and behind, they know danger can come at them from all sides. Her hooved feet look as dainty as two pairs of wedge-heeled shoes, but it makes me nervous when she begins pawing at the ground.

They’re my hostas you’re tramping on, I say to myself not her, because I hardly dare to move my lips. She has changed, in no more time than it takes to sneeze, she is no longer as cute as a Disney character. I don’t know what damage, other than to roses and leafy plants, she can do. For a moment she stands still, like an ornament on a shelf, then she points her ears forward in my direction, I can tell she is weighing me up as a bull might a matador. I throw my stare to the ground because I read somewhere you shouldn’t hold the gaze of an animal, definitely not a dog, because they perceive it as a sign of aggression. I figure a deer will probably feel the same way a dog does in that situation. I freeze, hoping my body will eventually blur into the brick pillar of the porch.

A lone car disturbs the silence around us, someone driving to the store for something, maybe eggs and bacon to cook an all English. Startled, she bobs her head up and down a few times then turns and jumps my fence. I had no idea they could jump that high. She goes through my neighbour’s open gate. I run to the pavement, scared for her safety. Across the road she runs without fear, her leaping gait enables her to clear a wall and then she double-backs, races across the road again and heads for the fields bordering the village. There is a dual carriageway to cross. I listen for a while, do not hear a screech of breaks, or the thud a body makes when hit by a vehicle. I am thankful she has made it. I decide to add chicken wire to my mental shopping list, I think my mother’s rose needs some protection.