

Gone to Earth

I should have been in bed, sleeping like the rest of the country, not on an ice-cold rock on a cliff top before the dawn of New Year's Day. But as my eyes opened in the darkness of a winter night, I'd felt the same agitation that had been keeping me awake for months, heard the same sounds whispering in my head, and I'd had to go . . .

. . . through the enclosed, narrow streets of Polruan, where curtains were drawn and quietness had settled. All the revellers, fireworks and noise of the night before had disappeared. A dark stillness had returned, broken only by pools of streetlight and the sense of the river moving, wide and deep near its mouth, but heaving inland with the force of the tide, the surface shattering into a thousand reflected lights. Only one boat was moored in the fast-running current, its bows straining on the anchor chain, its stern drifting in a rhythmic fishtail motion. I walked beyond the last of the houses and out on to the open field. I didn't need a torch; I'd come to know this route so well that even in the gloom my feet found their way to a foot-wide strip of worn earth that winds its way through gorse and rock, up steep-hewn steps where the land falls away to the sea, breaking against the deep blackness of the cliff below. Then beneath the arched, wind-shaped hawthorn, bent and contorted as it shadows the shape of the land. Up rough broken ground, my feet barely visible, through the gate to where the land flattens and the wind rises. I couldn't see it but I knew it was there. I could feel the pull of the coast in both directions and as I stretched my arms wide and blended into the unseen, craggy, well-known shapes my exhaled breath became the wind, as did I.

In a field just back from the coast path I found my way to a small rocky outcrop surrounded by an arc of gorse bushes, where the sheep had worn away the grass as they'd pushed themselves in to shelter from the weather. A place to stop and sit. The agitation in my body began to fade and I let go, slipping beneath the wave of exhaustion. The darkness was dense and impenetrable but the air hissed through the gorse above my head, carrying the acidic scent of the needled leaves, as the weight of the sea on the cliff below boomed through the earth in a steady rhythmic vibration. Curled in a ball, the hood of my coat pulled over my hat, gloved hands under my armpits, my thoughts finally moved outside my head, dissipating in the wild black air. No voice in my head, only silence. I couldn't think any more, only feel, and I gave in to sleep, a deep, brief, total oblivion.

A slight wash of light broke the darkness, bringing me back into my aching, cramped body, but I didn't move; I stayed curled tight, my body wrapped, hanging on to a small scrap of warmth. A dark form slipped through the greyness overhead, his firm tail and long broad wings tipping only slightly into the wind as he dipped over the cliff edge, disappearing from view. My

eyes held the clearing skyline, waiting for his return, not blinking in case I missed him. My head ached from the effort and my attention slipped to the horizon as the slightest slither of golden light began to break, brief and brilliant, before a curtain of squalling rain far out at sea obscured the wonder. Then he came silently back from below, rising into the sky without effort and hanging above the scrub of the headland. His dark back and black-tipped wings almost blended with the low sky; only the flash of white above his tail gave him away as a harrier hoping for breakfast.

Uncurling with a dull pain in my hips, I crawled out from beneath the gorse to see a badger leaving the coast path and climbing up through the field towards some undergrowth on the far fence. His short, stubby legs moved quickly through the patchy tufted grass. Caught out by the light, up too late, stirred from his winter slowness, he'd been driven into the cold night by hunger, but now he needed to be back in his sett, deep underground, safe, warm and hidden from view. He paused at the wide entrance to his tunnel, looking around, checking the air. Then he was gone, slipping into his safe invisible world. He'd gone to earth.

In the faint greying lift of light I climbed on to the last rock and sat with my feet hanging over the edge. At the edge of the land and the start of the sea. In a space between worlds, at a time between years, in a life between lives. I'm lost, but here, at least for a moment, I'm found.

Back through the village and still nothing was stirring. In Fowey, on the opposite side of the river, a few lights were on. People were groggily making coffee, turning up the heating and going back to bed. I followed the path-wide streets to the huge looming bulk of the chapel, through the iron gate and around a concrete paved corridor between the building and the cliff face. Through the door to the narrow apartment at the back. The cold had crept into my bones and my body ached all over. But I thought I'd found a sense of understanding that I'd been searching for since the day we arrived at the chapel, since the day we'd walked through that door for the first time. The day we'd put our rucksacks down on the bare floor at the end of a 630-mile walk, unlaced our muddy boots and tried to rediscover how to live under a roof. Finally I thought I knew why I couldn't settle, why I was restless, sleepless. I made tea and took it up the stairs to Moth, my husband, lover, friend of over thirty years.

He was lying spreadeagled on the mattress in the bedroom; even the growing light of the day finding its way through a stained-glass window hadn't woken him. Nothing seemed to wake him; he could sleep for twelve hours and still need more. But I shook him and started his day as usual, with tea and two Rich Tea biscuits.

'Moth, wake up, there's something I've got to do.'

‘What? What are you doing – why are you dressed?’

‘I couldn’t sleep.’

‘Again?’

‘I know, I’m so tired, but there’s something I have to do.’

Pushing the foam mattress to the corner of the room next to the cardboard wardrobe where our clothes hung left a large space on the lino-covered floor. We took a green package out of the rucksack that stood in the corner of the room, unzipped the case and shook out the familiar bundle of nylon. Unfurling the tent, I was hit with the smell of damp and sand, wind, rain and ozone-fresh, gull-filled air. I was outside, in the wild, on every shade of red, black and brown soil, in damp mossy woods and deep hidden valleys.

‘You do what you need to do but I think I might still use the mattress. I’m actually getting used to the comfort again.’

‘Okay, but I need to try this. I can’t carry on without sleep.’

I clicked the duct-tape-bound poles back together with a rising sense of anticipation as they slotted into position and the green dome rose into shape. Crawling into the damp-smelling space it created, I was overcome with a rush of joy. Moth went to make more tea while I dragged in the old battered inflatable mats and sleeping bags and took a pillow off the bed. I was back. This was it. My face sank into the pillow, the world slipped away and sleep washed over me on an incoming tide of relief. I’d gone to earth.