

# 1



SO HERE SHE WAS, OLD NOW, STANDING BY THE ROADSIDE waiting.

Ever since she had entered her ninetieth year Marvellous Ways spent a good part of her day waiting, and not for death, as you might assume, given her age. She wasn't sure what she was waiting for because the image was incomplete. It was a sense, that's all, something that had come to her on the tail feather of a dream – one of Paper Jack's dreams, God rest his soul – and it had flown over the landscape of sleep just before light and she hadn't been able to grasp that tail feather and pull it back before it disappeared over the horizon and disintegrated in the heat of a rising sun. But she had known its message: Wait, for it's coming.

She adjusted the elastic on her large glasses and fitted them close to her face. The thick lenses magnified her eyes tenfold

and showed them to be as blue and as fickle as the sea. She looked up and down the stretch of road once grandly known as the High Road, which was now used as a cut-through by heavy farm vehicles on their way to Truro. The familiar granite cottages – ten in all – built a century ago to house men for the farms and gardens of large estates, were boarded up and derelict, visited only by ghostly skeins of gorse and bramble that had blown in like rumour from afar.

They called it a village, but St Ophere was, technically, a hamlet, since the church that had given its name to the cluster of dwellings was situated in the tidal creek below where old Marvellous lived. There wasn't a schoolhouse either, for that was situated two miles west in the coastal hamlet of Washaway, a place that had lived up to its name earlier that year when the great drifts of snow had turned effortlessly into floods. But what the village did have, however, was a bakehouse.

Back-along, visitors to the area had often called the village 'Bakehouse' instead of its saintly name because Mrs Hard, the owner, had painted BAKEHOUSE in pink lettering across the grey slate roof: an elegant contrast to the once-white stone walls.

Every morning, when the oven was hotten ready, Mrs Hard used to ring her bell and her customers stirred, and unbeknownst to her, so did every drowned sailor from The Lizard to The Scillies as that bell had been scavenged from a salvaged wreck. The village women would take down their uncooked pies and pasties and loaves and load them into the burning embers. Mrs Hard use to call her oven 'Little Hell', and if you got the position of your pie wrong and took someone else's, that's where you would end up. Well, that's what she told the children when they came to collect their mothers' cooked offerings. It was the cause of many a disturbed night, as children burned up

under their oft-darned sheets fearing what was to come if they ever chose wrong.

It had been a destination village on account of its bread. Now, in 1947, it was nothing more than a desolate reminder of the cruel passing of time.

The breeze stirred and lifted the old woman's hair. She looked up to the sky. It was lilac-grey and low, rain-packed, but Marvellous doubted that rain would fall. Blow away, she whispered. She crossed the road and stood in front of the bakehouse. She placed her lamp on the step and pressed her palms firmly against the weather-beaten door. Mrs Hard? she whispered softly.

It was Mrs Hard who had once told Marvellous that she was so good at waiting her life would be filled with good things.

*Patience*, that's what your father should have called you, she said. *Patience*.

But I'm not patient, said Marvellous. I'm *diligent*.

And Mrs Hard had looked down on the barefooted child with fancy words and ragged clothes, and thought how ungodly it was to rear a child in the woods, running wild and free like a Cornish Black pig. The girl needed a mother.

You need a mother, said Mrs Hard.

I had a mother, said Marvellous.

No. You had a *something*, said Mrs Hard. But I could be your mother.

And she waited for an answer but no answer came from the child's horrified mouth. Mrs Hard shook her head and said, Just you remember, though, it is patience that is a virtue and patience that is godly.

Mrs Hard liked the word 'godly'. She liked God, too. When her husband moved out in 1857, lured by the promise of wealth

from South African mines, Jesus and the well-loved reverend moved in. The transition was seamless, as was the first gold mine her husband went to, and the poor man was shunted from pit to pit across the Rand until he died scratching in that foreign dark for a glimpse of that golden key: the one that would fit a lock to a better life.

*‘Breathe on me, Breath of God, Fill me with life anew’.*

That’s what Mrs Hard had written above the bakehouse door when she heard of her husband’s death. Later on, someone – and old Marvellous smiled as she could still make out the faint ochre words that had stained her hands – had changed ‘breath’ to ‘bread’, but Mrs Hard never knew because she rarely looked up.

Salvation, for me, will come from the dirt, she once told Marvellous.

Like a potato? said the young child.

The weather vane creaked overhead. October dusk fell quickly on the hamlet as crows upon the overnight dead. Must be nearly November, thought Marvellous. Lights flickered in the distant villages, a solemn reminder of the passing of this one. She took out a box of matches and lit her oil lamp. She stood in the middle of the road and raised the lamp to the hills beyond. I’m still here, the gesture said.

A shaft of yellow light fell upon the hedgerow where a granite cross grew out of a bank of flattened primroses. Marvellous had always believed the cross to be an after-thought, hastily erected after the First War, as she could call it now. ‘1914–1918’, it read, with the names of long-gone faces underneath. But there was one name, she knew, that was not on the list. The name of Simeon Rundle had been excluded from the list.

Back in 1914 when the tide of war had rolled upon the

unsuspecting coast, village life had come to a sudden halt. There were no more fairs, no more dances, no more regattas because the men left and life froze in perpetual wait. A village without men dies, said Marvellous, and the village slowly did. The well-loved reverend was sent to a new parish in the City of London and shortly afterwards Mrs Hard received news that he had been killed in a Zeppelin air raid. She lay down on the shores of Little Jordan, as she referred to the creek, and willed her life to end. It obeyed straight away, such was the force of her will, and the bakehouse oven went out and God beat a retreat. Those left behind prayed constantly for peace but prayers came back with Return to Sender stamped all over them. Only the roll call of the dead grew.

But then one mild morning in May, Peace did appear, for that was the name given to a child born six months before the fighting stopped. Overdue, the child was, refusing to enter until the guns ceased, until the madness ceased, as if no amount of pushing or urging could force Peace into a broken world. And even then, when she came, it was reluctantly. As if she knew. Feet first and a head not budging, all mixed up, she was, feet and hands and legs and a cord. Like a calf.

A head weighed down by the burden of a name, said Marvellous as she whispered and twisted and pulled that child free.

Peace. It's just not as simple as that. And of course it wasn't.

Old ways of life don't return when the lives themselves have never returned. Only Simeon Rundle returned, came back to his new sister Peace, carrying a whole heap of horror with him. One morning, the villagers found him down by the creek, up to his neck in river mud and his own shit, waving a white handkerchief at a large hermit crab.

With his swollen tongue flapping out of his mouth like a slipper, he shouted, I thurrender, I thurrender, I thurrender, before raising his father's shotgun and blasting his heart *clean* from his chest. Or so the story goes.

The villagers gasped – two fainted – as it splattered against the church door like an ornate red knocker. The new lay preacher rushed out proclaiming it was the Devil's own work. Unfortunately, such a careless declaration flew swiftly on rumour's eager wings, and it wasn't long before the village of St Ophere acquired a taint that even the welcome addition of electric light in 1936 couldn't completely eradicate.

There was nothing actually wrong with the place. It was rightness that was at a tilt. Tides seemed higher, mists gathered there thicker and vegetation grew faster, as if nature was doing its best to correct the error, or if not to correct it then at least to hide it. But the suspicion of ill luck remained, and that's why the people slowly left: a steady stream of absences like bingo balls pulled from a hat. Migrating to distant villages whose lights still flickered in a low autumn sky.

Marvellous took a last look up and down the High Road, satisfied that whatever she was waiting for hadn't passed her by. The wind had picked up and the clouds were blowing through. She held the lamp high and crossed the road to the memorial and the standpipe, and made her way through the meadow where she had once kept a cow. The temperature was falling and the grass wet underfoot, and she thought the morning would reveal the first crust of frost. She could see the wood ahead, her ankles braced for the gentle incline and the careful march through the sycamores, the hazels and the sweet chestnuts down towards her creek. The tide was out. She could smell the saltmud, her favourite smell, the smell, she believed, of her

blood. She would rake up a pan full of cockles and steam them on a fire that would burn a tiny hole in the night. Her mouth began to water. She stumbled and fell next to a blackthorn bush and made use of the mishap by picking two pocketfuls of sloes. She saw the light from her caravan up ahead. Felt, strangely, lonely. Never get old, she whispered to herself.

Late. An owl hooted and the dark eyes of night gazed unblinking towards the horizon. Marvellous couldn't sleep. She stayed awake sitting by the riverbank keeping the moon company, a pile of shucked cockleshells at her feet. She huddled in the warmth of firelight, her yellow oilskin raincoat bright and pungent and hot to touch. The stars looked faint and distant but it may have been her eyes. She once used binoculars, now she used a telescope; soon night would capture day for ever. She felt comforted by the blurred outline of her old crabber rocking gently on the tide; the familiar creak of rope against wood was a good sound in the undulating nocturnal silence.

She had lived in the creek almost her whole life long and had been happy there – almost – her whole life long. Islanded in the middle was the small church that had once been a chapel but was now a ruin. For as long as she could remember the tide had carved around the church until the church had broken away from the people or maybe the people had broken away from the church? It was so long ago now that old Marvellous couldn't remember what had happened first. But the tide had carved its path until church and headstones and faith had all gone adrift. Sunday services used to be held when the tide was at its lowest point, sometimes at daybreak, sometimes at dusk, and once, she remembered, in the dead of night, a lanterned trail of believers sang their way up the riverbed like pilgrims seeking Galilee.

Yes, we'll gather at the river,  
The beautiful, the beautiful river;  
Gather with the saints at the river  
That flows by the throne of God.

She swigged from a bottle of sloe gin. Saint's nectar, it was, flowing by the throne of God. Amen. Light from the altar candle slinked out of the church, dusting the tops of gravestones that the tide had mercifully spared. It was its own star, thought Marvellous. She lit that candle every night and had done so for years. A lighthouse keeper, that was what she really was. That's what had drawn Whatshisname to her shore during the war years. That, and the music, of course.

Whatshisname. The *American*. She had watched him go into the church as a shadow, and when he had emerged he was still a shadow with deep hues of mauve emanating from his dark skin, and from his mouth the glowing tip of a cigarette pulsed like the heart of a night insect. He walked across the dry riverbed lured by a familiar song, and as he pulled himself up the bank, he saw the wireless, sitting in a battered pram parked beneath the trees.

He said, Louis Armstrong.

And she said, Marvellous Ways, nice to meet you at last.

And he laughed and she had never heard laughter like that, not in all her days, and his eyes flashed as bright as torchlight. He sat with her, and the table rocked and the river rippled as bombers flew over and the air raid sirens sounded and bombs fell over the Great Port, over Truro too, and barrage balloons cast deep shadows across the sky, and Louis Armstrong sang of lips and arms and hearts as anti-aircraft guns pounded against the indigo dark, and two strangers sat quietly under



a tree that had seen it all before.

He talked about his grandfather back home in South Carolina in the Low Country, talked about the fishing trips they took along the oozy marshes, how the smell of mud and salt were the smells of home, and Marvellous said, I know what you mean. And he told her of the trestle bridges that glowed pink at dusk and cedars that grew out of the lush wetlands and the heavy scent of tea olive and jasmine, which reminded him of his late mother. He said he missed eating catfish, and Marvellous said, So do I, even though she had only ever eaten dogfish. Together they toasted Life and clinked their mugs and pretended they were somewhere far far away.

He came often after that. Brought her doughnuts from the American doughnut factory in Union Square, and they ate them with strong black tea even though he preferred coffee, and they listened to the radio Rhythm Club and tapped out rhythms with their jitterbug feet. Sometimes he brought tins of Spam, corned beef, too; he never let her go hungry. And once he brought her a poster of a film she had seen a couple of years before. He was thoughtful like that.

But then days before the planned invasion of France, he asked her for a charm.

A charm? she said.

A lucky charm. To bring me back safely, he said.

She looked into his eyes and said, But that's not what I do. I've never made charms.

Oh, but that's what people said you did.

That's what they've always said, and she held his hand instead and the only charm she had was hers and it radiated out.

June 1944 was The Last Goodbye. Those American boys were shipping out. He strutted over whistling, all gabardine

trousers and Hawaiian shirt, gosh he looked so smart. He gave her all he had left – chocolate, cigarettes, stockings – and they sat down under the tree and drank tea and listened to Armstrong and Teagarden, Bechet, too, and someone else who would never be as famous. She watched the young man play rhythm upon his knees, watched his mouth turn clarinet. In that moment, either side of him, she saw two futures vying for space. In one he lay still on Omaha Beach. In the other he sat still, head in a book, trying to make something of himself in a country coloured by hate. When he stood up to leave she said, Go left, and he said, What's that? She said, I don't know what it means but you will when the time comes. You must go left.

So long, Marvellous, he waved.

So long, Henry Manfred Gladstone II, she waved. *Henry Manfred Gladstone II*. So *that* was his name.

It's been a pleasure, he said.

The night grew wild with movement. The concrete barges began to depart and thousands of men embarked from piers and beaches, and there was such a kerfuffle, and yet by morning all was quiet. The generators were quiet. The smell of diesel subsiding. The Americans had left and had left behind tales of romance and unborn children, and so much joy, and it was the women who cried because they always did.

So long, Henry Manfred Gladstone II, she whispered. It's been a pleasure.