

# AFTERMATH

We came to a forest one afternoon. The sky was steel blue, the sun stood low. We'd been a long time on the road, but the sight of the dense canopy eased my weariness. I hadn't seen a forest for years and I longed to tread a mosslined path amongst the trees. We decided to explore the woods.

The first thing I noticed was the smell. Or rather; the absence of smell. It had been a warm day and I was subconsciously expecting the aroma of sun-heated pine needles. But there was none. It took me a few moments to register what exactly was missing, but once I realised, I tried to focus better; drew all the air I could through my nose, closed my eyes and searched for the familiar scent. It wasn't there. There was a slight, hardly noticeable whiff of something, but it wasn't pine. It wasn't any plant scent that I'd ever smelled.

A horrible thought flickered past: What if it had never been there? What if this specific smell – so integral to my conception of a forest – was something my mind had constructed to flesh out an insufficient image? I couldn't quite pin down why this thought scared me so. But the idea that smell, that foremost conjurer of memory, could instead be a *product of memory*, seemed in that moment a sinkhole, which, if fallen into, would leave the present utterly unmoored. I stepped away from it; raised a fence of common sense around it. Of course it wasn't my memory, but this particular forest, which disregarded the rules of the sensual world.

The trunks were straight and uniform; too thick for one man to embrace; and lined irregularly with gangly, upward-striving branches. The trees stood close enough to make the view in any direction coalesce into a stripe pattern, where darkening shades of grey-brown-green were the only means to indicate depth of vision. This was an effect I reminisced from my childhood, when my father and I would head deep into the fens to search for cloudberries. Though again, there was something here that jarred with my memory. Somehow, although the branches tangled and the canopy interlaced above us, this forest didn't seem quite *wild* enough.

There were a few birds around; some soft chirping of goldcrests high above us, a cooing pigeon, and the sharp flapping of wings from a jay or a magpie. But the way the sound resonated, it had an eerie, cold undertone. The shrill cry of a woodpecker took on an almost metallic timbre.

The ground was, as I had anticipated, covered with pine needles and moss. Not the fluffy, billowing moss before my mind's eye. This moss was a flat, creeping kind; dark green

and wet looking. It was still difficult to tell whether we were walking on a real path or just moving from clearing to clearing. Maybe some kind of animal path. It had in any case been long since any human had sat foot here. Then again, there weren't many people out on the roads either.

I was striding along in silence. My right hand outstretched; catching and releasing the few bits of undergrowth I passed, while my thoughts stretched in a similar way towards my childhood memories; trying to grasp them and tie them to this new experience. But the past was an ice-flake drifting away, separated by a dark unbridgeable gap from this present.

Suddenly I realised I was on my own. I called out and my voice smacked into the trees with a hollow clang. With a sour lump in my throat I ran a few steps back and found M perched on top a boulder.

'Come up here! Look!'

I climbed up and saw what he was looking at: A small lake lay just a few metres further in amongst the trees. Dark and still, with just a handful of red water lilies lining its further shore, it was like an unblinking eye in the middle of the forest. We sat silent on the rock for a while. Watched a snake draw a meandering line across the water surface. The sun sank, and for a few moments before darkness the lake became a mirror, perfectly repeating the skyline upside down. Someone vertically disoriented could have taken the reflection for the real world. When it became almost too dark to see we rolled out our sleeping bags by the foot of the boulder and fell asleep to the metallic rolling song of a nightjar.

When I awoke, the elves were dancing. Thin, twirling figures of mist drove across the surface of the lake in the first rays of a pale yellow sunrise. In that light M's sleeping face looked strange to me. I saw that I didn't know him. In my sleep, I'd dreamt of a lover, with the most familiar and comforting face, like someone who'd been with me my whole life. Now it was gone, only a lingering but fast fading sliver of that love remaining. And in comparison, waking life seemed full of feigned and fake feelings.

I slid silently out of my sleeping bag and walked down to the water's edge. There I leaned against a small tree. It gave away. Having not anticipated its evasiveness I lost balance and fell heavier towards the tree, which in turn fell with a splash into the lake. The noise woke M up.

'What was that?'

'The tree,' I said, lying baffled on the lakeshore. 'It's got no roots.'

It was true. Where the tree had stood there was just a round hollow in the ground. No broken off tree-stump, no pried up earth; just a shallow round hole. The butt of the tree itself, now perched over the muddled water surface, was a perfectly flat base, without so much as a single ring indicating yearly growth. M came and stood next to me.

'What the hell?'

He walked over to another tree and pushed hard at it. It too fell into the lake with scant resistance, leaving the same voided slot in the ground. M was looking wild eyed at me and before I'd even moved over to inspect this second felling he was already at the trunk of a much larger tree, putting his shoulder heavy against it.

'Wait!' I cried, but the large tree had already started tipping; not towards the lake but in the direction we'd come from the evening before. While rootless, its branches were long, and in its displacement it got caught up in two other trees, which in their turn started keeling over under the weight. The ominous cracking of thick branches made M realise his mistake.

'Run!' he screamed. And while the trees broke and splintered against each other and the stones, we fled head over heels in what we hoped was the opposite direction. The continuous, thunderous crashes behind us told of the terrible domino effect we had put in motion, and we ran with panicked glances over our shoulders.

We ran up a slope. The trees stood sparser up on the height and we were out of harm's way. Behind us the sound of falling trunks was abating. A few more great cracks and then a tense silence fell. A large part of the forest at the foot of the hill lay fallen like a giant's game of Mikado. Some trees had broken into large chunks – not ripped along fibrous lines, but cracked into almost crystalline fractures. A flock of ousted birds circled the devastation and disappeared to the west. Stunned, we gazed after them and towards where the city stretched across the entire horizon.

Strange, how much the houses looked like a forest from over here.

