

## Taking leave

1,915 words

It's now been a year. She was forty-nine and we'd all clung on silently to the hope she would make it to fifty. God wasn't bothered about round numbers, it turned out. I had cried to Him across the beeps and clicks but had been met with white walls and silence. A silence that seemed to say I wasn't good enough.

Every day since I've been losing myself in the sound of the river. I leave Pa in his dusty workshop, chiselling stubbornly at the lime wood until it yields, as if each perfect bead and bevel somehow proves that life can be shaped according to his will.

'Off again?' he says, eyes fixed on the wood. It's clamped, ready for attack.

'I'll see you for lunch, Pa.'

'Suppose you will.'

I feel a deep urge in that moment to reach out and rest my hand on his shoulder. He wears the same quilted jacket in its dark green check, covered in sawdust. Over the top is a fawn apron, loosely tied, stained and spattered with varnishes and oils. I imagine the softness of that jacket, its warmth, and the sharp bony shoulder beneath. We've learnt to share the silences now and not try to fill them as she used to with her tinkling words, brightening the air as they did like a sweep of chimes. I'll be leaving soon anyway, we've agreed. Time to move on now. 'You aren't a teenager any more,' is his refrain.

The river cuts through the whole valley, and after searching for weeks, I've found the point where it's at its steepest descent, where the torrent is so furious it drums and pounds the rocks, filling the glade with its roar. It takes me an hour of stumbling through brambles to get here, and the path is never quite the same.

I arrive with ragged breath, the effort prickling my skin, and find my sitting-stone. I ease off my cap and bury my watch deep in my pocket. Too much of last year was like a countdown, and even seconds weigh heavily now. I stare at the water, willing it to be a symbol of something timeless, allowing my eyes to drift half-closed so that the surface reflections become a dance of hexagons and moons.

And the more the river draws me in, the more the darkness of the trees closes around me, as if they are huddling in conspiracy against my presence. I do not belong here, they say. I notice them, briefly, and the late winter's cold seems more chilled than before, snaring my breath.

I outstay my welcome, allowing the space to numb me. The water intercedes for me, absorbing my anger and tossing it mercilessly against the stones, grinding it into the riverbed. And normally I would walk away, hauling myself up the muddy bank, grabbing for those low-slung blackthorn branches that seem to be reaching for the water but are held back by a spell, as if forbidden to touch and drink.

Today is different, though. I had come to rage at God, harder than ever before. And so I yell into the water at its deepest point, where it plunges into a roiling pool before following on its swift course. I yell until I'm hoarse, until the words chafe in the throat. A year's spite wells in me then crashes, fanning out on a distant shore.

Afterwards, I sense a silence. A silence that rings through my soul, blotting out the river's unholy din. I am shocked into stillness, training my ears inward, checking for signs of God. There is no rumbling paternal voice, no comforting whispers, no words nor thoughts neatly dropping into mind like pennies through a slot. Just an alien peace.

As I climb back through the blackthorn, I catch a glimpse of the hope to which mum had resolutely clung throughout her last year — and a moment later just a touch, breath-light, of forgiveness. The intimacy of it makes me shiver.

Back home that afternoon I avoid Pa, calling down that I'm not hungry and ignoring his knocking at the bedroom door. The silence is still there, I hear it as a faint echo of the river's rapids. It is too delicate for words.

And at breakfast today, back at the pine table that he built — but that, somehow, smells of her laugh — the silence is wearing thinner.

'You going to tell me what's going on?' His back is turned.

'Just went for a walk, Pa.'

'After that, I mean.'

I allow the kitchen clock to tick a while, for its stubborn iron pulse to hold the moment. Pa turns, coffee in his usual cracked mug. He sips and raises his eyebrows. 'Well?'

'I went to the river again.'

'Yes, and *after*?' There is an edge of irritation.

'I don't know. I felt at peace.'

'Peace?' He snorts with a slight, disbelieving shake of the head. I find my voice rising. 'Yes and something, I don't know, more than that.'

'What do you mean, *more*?' Pa puts down the mug slowly, steadying it on the table.

'I don't know, it's hard to say, I-'

'Don't start with all her rubbish now, will you?'

'What do you mean?' I ask, even though I know all too well.

'We can find good things in *this* world too, you know? Right *here*.' He gestures loosely to the kitchen window, to some imagined evidence of good things in the front garden. I look briefly, scornfully, out onto our tired patio. Perhaps he means those wan daffodils that are struggling to open in the cold. Or the rain-soaked laundry that I should have brought in yesterday.

I get sharply out of my chair. Pa, not being one for drama, instinctively turns his back again, as if he's examining the skirting afresh, appraising it for faults.

'I felt,' I begin, trying to piece together the right formula, one that does involve the words 'God', 'spirit' or 'peace', 'I just didn't feel alone any more.'

That was enough for him. He turns, his face already redder and his eyes, usually narrow, now wide, incredulous. 'She would be still with us! Here at this table, now, if it weren't for all that... that...'

He struggles to find a word that is venomous enough to express, all in one, his grief, anger and total contempt. He holds on to the back of the chair for control, thick workman's hands looking as if they could bend and snap the wood. As he breathes out slowly, I see how his tears refuse to break in that moment. Instead he stares at me, searching for clues. And all I want to do is reach out, touch that shoulder, speak about hope, but I imagine how flimsy the sentence would be, how easily swatted to the floor.

I find myself shouting, 'Well, I'm out of here soon. Next week, sooner if I can. Then you can have her back to yourself!' And I leave him bent low over his chair, without waiting for his response.

After that we play an elaborate game of hide-and-seek. I contrive excuses to eat in my room or to be out for the evening, even though I am just walking around the block, looking to the sullen sky for company. Pa, in turn, spends extra hours in the workshop, emerging blinking and rubbing his stiff

hands, his hair thick with dust and chippings. He is working on a chair for a client who I know (from those descriptions where Pa thinks I'm not listening) likes well-turned spindles and a finish that brings out the depth of the grain so that the wood gleams 'like fresh fruit'.

I apply for an assistant's job in the ice cream parlour on the front and they take me without any fuss. It seems too easy, as if mocking my inaction. Pa says he'll chip in, help me out with my new digs, but I refuse. I give myself two days to pack.

I make my way down now to the river, sensing it will be my last time for a long while. I seek out a new spot where the current is calmer and we can have a conversation for a change, the river and I. The play of light entrances me slowly, as it always does, and I hear music in the water's rhythms and the melody as it improvises its route between the pebbles.

It is a grey day, the afternoon cloud swollen and low, and the river is slipping past in black-and-white. The boulder I'm sitting on digs into me, filling me with its cold, and the alders behind me are sodden by the morning's rain, their branches slick and dark. God has let go of me again, perhaps.

And that's when I see it: an almost imperceptible flash of emerald in the corner of my eye, a dart into the shallows to my right. It emerges with a shimmer of royal blue and copper, a minnow speared in its beak. My first ever sighting of a kingfisher. As I walk back my senses are filled with those bright colours, that sharp fluttering, knowing at last I have something to offer Pa as a farewell. A conversation.

He serves up beans on cold toast for our supper. We both know she would have added some garnish, some side vegetables — to 'ease the passage', she'd say and we'd smile. But this will do. I tell him about the kingfisher and he nods. 'They're getting rarer these days. You're lucky,' he says. I describe to him how the green shone, how it lit up the sky (like a prayer, I want to say).

'Beautiful birds,' he agrees.

'Made me think,' I say, leaving it there.

'Expect it did,' he says, 'expect it did.'

Then we talk about his chair again. It is almost finished. Maybe I'll get to test it before I go. I've always been his chief chair-tester, and we compare notes on the finish, on the richness of the wood's vein and the charm of its knots.

I spend the next day packing, wondering which memories are too heavy to take. Pa is working late and I can hear his frantic chiselling and scraping. I've made my own supper, still hoping he'll join me to while away this last evening, to mark it in some clumsy way. Perhaps I still remind him too much of her. Tomorrow morning over breakfast I'll touch him on his shoulder and that will be enough.

I give him another hour, but the wood has him held in a vice. I know better than to disturb him, so I make my way up the stairs. My feet drag on the carpet, I notice, as if heavier than before.

As I splash my face in the bathroom, I hear a shuffling on the stairs.

'Night, son.'

'Night, Pa.'

In the neon reflection of the bathroom mirror I feel his absence so vividly it burns in my chest and throat. Reluctantly I open my bedroom door into the dark.

There, on my bed, I sense something out of place. I step over, not wanting to turn on the light.

Dead centre on the pillow is a block of wood that has been carved hastily but deftly into a fluid, unmistakable shape. It looks, in the moonlight, as if it could take wing. A kingfisher.