

KATYA BALEN

October,
October

Illustrated by
Angela Harding

"One of
the most
beautiful books
I've ever read"
*Kiran Millwood
Hargrave*

BLOOMSBURY

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Ruby Lambert, this one's for you

We find the owl at the very edge of our woods the morning after the storm. Wind-blasted and wings flight-frozen and round eyes glassy. I touch its feathers lightly with my fingertip and I'm surprised because they still feel real even though the owl has slipped away somewhere else and Dad is already digging a hole for it in the rain-soaked earth.

I lift its body and it's huge in my hands but the hollow bones do most of the work for me and I almost think the owl might shake the stiffness from its feathers and fly away. I sometimes see flashes of owls dipping through the trees. I hear them calling softly

like they're singing night songs to each other and they're beautiful, and like secrets wrapped up in the darkness. I really don't think this one should go into a hole in the ground. I say that to Dad and he says that it's the *circle of life* and that now the owl will *become part of nature again*. Rotting down to bones and feeding the soil with its flesh and growing the roots of plants from its feathers. I almost want to see it happening. Once I found the skeleton of a fox swirled into a circle of bones and scraps of fur. The sweep of its skull and the harp of its ribs were bone-white and beautiful.

Dad shifts the last of the dirt with his spade and sits down at the base of a tree with a huff of air that smokes around him. I put the bird in the hole and mark the grave with a smooth pebble so I'll always know.

After we've buried the owl we walk all around the woods and clear the worst of the damage from the winds and the rain and a little tongue of lightning that has licked the old oak with the branches

that spread out like the tentacles of a giant squid. The damage isn't as bad as it's been before and it feels like the storm has cleaned everything back to being new and fresh. I use my hawk eyes and search the ground in flicks and sweeps and I find treasures in the rain-raked earth just like always. Slivers of pottery and something that could be a Roman coin. Gems of smooth blue-green glass. I slip them into my pocket and they bump against each other and clamour to tell their stories to me, but I'll listen later. Now we scrape and chop and rake and tug until half-cracked branches and split trunks are neatened and the raggedy edges of the woods start to look a little bit better.

I help Dad load the best of the fallen branches on to the trailer so we can chop them for firewood or maybe a bonfire, and then we drive the quad over the muddy paths and back to the house so we can unload it into the woodstore. This is my least favourite job because it makes my muscles ache and no matter how much wood I move from the trailer into the

store the pile never seems to get any smaller. But I think about the stories hiding in my pocket and I can already feel the beginnings and the middles and the ends start to stitch themselves together in my brain and my muscles work on their own. I reach again and again until my hands touch air and the trailer is empty. Dad and I climb on to the quad bike so we can drive it round the woods for one final check.

Dad lets me drive, although my legs aren't long enough to flick the gears with my feet so he does that bit while he's sitting behind me. We wind through the woods in a circle back to the owl.

Dad says *hang on slow down a second* but I'm already going so slowly that I just have to stop completely and he climbs off the back of the quad. He pushes back a matted curtain of sedge and stoops down. *Come and see this* he says and I hop down and peer into the dark because maybe he's found more treasures stirred from the soil.

It's an owl. A tiny feathered speck of baby owl.

A white heart shape just starting to print on its face. Wide eyes. A minuscule flick of a beak. Fat fragile chest. Dipped in a quiver of soft puffs from its head to the tips of its folded wings.

I reach out my fingers towards it but Dad catches my hand gently and shakes his head. *We have to leave it. Another owl might come back for it and if we take an owl this little ...*

His voice fades off and I want to snatch the unspoken words out of his mouth and throw them into the darkening sky because I don't want to leave this owl hidden in bruised leaves and all alone.

He tells me to pop inside while he puts the quad away so I can get a hot drink and warm up a bit before we go back out and sort some supper.

When I'm inside I put the kettle on the stove and sit in my favourite chair. It's squashy and patched up and it looks like it might be a hundred years old.



The stuffing is starting to fall out of one side again and it puffs out like a storm cloud.

I settle in and look up how long it takes for a buried bird to become nothing but those hollow bones that felt like air in my hands, and all the books say six months. So by March the buried owl will be snow-white in the dark beneath me. I don't think about where the baby will be but I cross my fingers so hard that the bones pop bright in my knuckles and I wish that a parent comes back for it.

I read about owls and how they eat mice and voles and shrews. They eat every last scrap and all the stuff they can't digest is regurgitated back out in a pellet. You can see the skin and bones and fur of everything they've eaten. I read about how the first thing they see that brings them food is the thing they will always think of as their parent, even if that's a hand puppet with a mouse in its paw.

I finish reading and wash my sweaty hair in the kitchen sink. I shake the droplets loose like pearls that burst in the air around me.

* * *

We live in the woods and we are wild.

Tonight we howl at the star-dusted sky. We throw our voices and shape them and mix them and mould them like clay. We can stretch our sounds so that they reach the very tops of our tallest trees and down to the secret-filled earth and so that they tangle in the brambles and skim across the pond because this world is ours and we are alone.

Just us.

A pocket of people in a pocket of a world that's small as a marble. We are tiny and we are everything and we are wild.

We live in the woods.

We live in the woods and we are wild.

Our house sits in the woods and it's made from the trees that frame it. They've been chopped and planed and smoothed into a house, and so it's not the same as looking at the twisted reaches of the branches but

I like to be inside the woods. It feels like a secret because we are hidden away and forgotten about in the best way, even though people know we're here. We have to go into the village every year or so and buy the food we can't grow or the clothes we can't make, which is nearly all clothes except for socks and even those aren't very good when I try. Dad can turn a ball of wool into a foot shape with a click-clack of needles and half an eye on the stove but I can't manage more than a tangle. We get all the things we need for another year and slip back into the woods while the village forgets us again.

The house was built by Dad before I was born. I wasn't born here though, because at the last minute the woman who is my mother said *no way* and she was whisked off to the hospital and she was pushed down corridors that were white and bright and treeless and blank and like nothing she remembered. But then she did remember. She remembered all the things like microwaves and internet and heating that happens at the push of a button and not from the roar

of a stove that makes your clothes smell smoky and sweet. She remembered, and when she had her baby wrapped in a white blanket that matched the walls and the sheets and the pillows she said to Dad that she *couldn't go back*.

She did, for a bit. But she was floating off into the world that fringes ours, and when I was four she was gone. In my head I think I remember the day she left but the memory is like trying to hold water in my cupped hands and it trickles away before my eyes. There are wisps of a woman holding on to my hand and I feel my whole body being pulled along by the tide of another person running and my legs can't keep up. There's crying and I know that I let out a shriek so loud it pierced the sky and the birds scattered.

I wouldn't let her leave with me. I wouldn't leave the woods.

When I try and remember her now it's like she's been sliced out of the memory and all that's left is a black person-shaped shadow where she should be, or sometimes she's there but then her edges

fuzz and curl into smoke and nothing's left. I hate her for leaving the wild and I hate her for leaving us and I hate her for leaving our perfect little pocket of the world.

She writes all the time but I don't ever read the letters. I don't know why Dad even bothers collecting them from the wooden letter box at the very edge of the track that leads out into the whole wide world. She's the only person who ever posts us anything. Once Dad opened one of the letters and laid it out on the kitchen table for me to read, but I scrunched up the paper into a scribbled ball and watched it turn to ash in the fire and the inky words fade into the embers. When I was five she came to the woods and I hid up a tree and didn't come down until it was night, even when Dad climbed up to try to coax me out. She did it again when I was seven and then again when I was nine, and every time I scrambled into the safety of branches. Dad says she's not too far away and I should see her and see where she lives and talk to her and be her daughter again, but I stop

scavenging and climb up to the top of a tree whenever he talks about her and he doesn't do it so much now. Everything is far away from here and that's exactly how I want it to stay.

There's a word in German that I read about. German has all these strange and magical words that have a million feelings curled up in the letters, like being happy when someone else is sad or longing to be somewhere where you're not right now. I only get that when we go to the village. My favourite one means *forest solitude*, and it's the feeling of being alone in the woods and being calm and happy and safe, and she didn't want that. She wanted me to go to school and spend my weekends with her far away, but then when would I ever be wild and free and climb trees and scavenge for treasure and tell stories by a fire?

I don't want her.

She's not wild like we are.