

By Rowan and Yew

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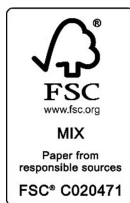
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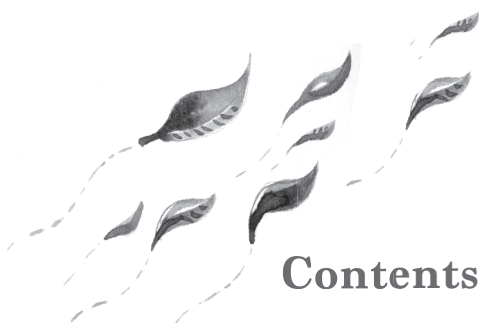
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*It is the great migrating time;
the winter visitors – the wild geese,
swans and duck tribe, the redwings
and fieldfares – are all arriving,
while our summer visitors are
taking their leave . . .*

B.B., from *Indian Summer*





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A watercolor illustration in a muted, earthy color palette. On the left, a dark, gnarled tree stands next to a tall, slender lamp post with a rectangular light fixture. A small fox with a white underbelly and dark fur is standing on a patch of ground with small stones. To the right of the fox is a large, dark, textured can or jar, and a single acorn lies on the ground nearby. Large, dark leaves are scattered across the foreground. In the upper right, several leaves are shown in motion, following a dashed line that curves upwards. The overall style is soft and artistic, with a focus on natural elements.

ROWAN



1

Goodbye to all that



*As the Hidden Folk prepare
to set out for Ash Row,
there's a last-minute change in personnel.*

It was the beginning of September, and although the days were still sunny the nights had begun to grow cold. In a little park in the heart of a city, the hips and haws and rowan berries were ripening, and the first conkers had begun to drop with a thump; they lay glossy and irresistible under the horse chestnut trees, some still half-held in their spiky green casings, some loose among the grass.

Disguised among the leaf litter under a rhododendron bush were a pair of little bat-skin tents, and beside them two of the Hidden Folk, each about as tall as your hand is long, were sitting cross-legged, making conker bowls. One, in a frogskin onesie, had a transparent left hand and foot, and was carefully cutting a line around a conker using a borrowed knife with 'STANLEY' engraved on it. The

other, who was entirely visible and wore a jaunty hat made from an acorn cup, sat nearby, scooping out the white insides of the conker with what looked like a discarded SIM card. Although it was school home-time, and several teenagers sat on the benches eating chips and talking, nobody saw a thing – because they weren’t expecting to.

‘Done!’ said Moss triumphantly, setting the half conker aside. ‘Now all we need to do is polish the insides.’

‘We’ve learnt so much from the Hobs about indoor things this summer, so it’s nice to show them our outdoor skills,’ mused Sorrel, carefully putting the knife away. ‘Just think, they might not even have seen a conker before! How weird is that?’

‘Very,’ said Moss, getting up and doing some gentle stretches. The scars from the cat bite still hurt sometimes, but it helped to move about. It was scary to think how much worse it could have been, so Moss tried not to – especially as their quest to prevent the disappearance of their kind from the Wild World needed to start soon.

All summer, Moss and dear old Cumulus, who had almost vanished, had lived indoors with their new friends Minaret and Macadam in a secret dwelling deep inside a block of flats. Sorrel and

Burnet, who preferred to sleep outdoors, had set up camp in the little park, but they all saw one another every day.

With help from Chip and Bud the squirrels and advice from Spangle the starling the four of them had slowly become used to Hive life, and had developed what Spangle approvingly called ‘nous’. They learnt where to go and where not to go, what times of day were safe, and how to move around without being seen by Mortals. That was easy for old Cumulus, being almost transparent these days, and it was something Burnet was good at too, being an intrepid and outdoorsy type. It helped that most of the Mortals didn’t take much notice of the Wild World around them, only of each other, and the shops, and the little black slabs they often held in their hands. (Sorrel, being an inventor, thought the black slabs looked incredibly interesting, and spent a lot of time speculating about what they might be.)

‘How are you feeling these days?’ asked Sorrel now, as they began to polish the insides of the bowls with soft honeysuckle leaves.

‘Oh – nearly mended, though it’s taken far longer than I expected. I know everyone’s been impatient to get home to Ash Row. I’m sorry I’ve held you all up.’

‘Don’t be silly, Moss! The time hasn’t been wasted, has it? We’ve made a good start on finding a new role for our kind in the Wild World. Burnet’s planted wildflower seeds in every bare bit of earth we can get to, I’ve been picking up litter every day, and Cumulus’s lectures on “Avoiding Poison: A Guide for the Modern Hive-Dweller” were very well attended – even if it was only by slugs.’

‘But it hasn’t made any difference yet,’ said Moss anxiously. ‘The people who are fading are still fading – Cumulus, you, Burnet. Perhaps Pan hasn’t yet noticed what we’re doing, or perhaps we haven’t understood Robin Goodfellow’s prophecy properly.’

‘You mean, *Ash, oak and thorn were at the world’s dawn; rowan and yew will make it anew?*’ said Sorrel. ‘It’s still early days, Moss – when we get to your old home, we’ll work it all out properly. And anyway, it’s been good for us to get to know the Hive a bit, and learn about different creatures and their habits, don’t you think? If you stay all your life in one place, you can end up thinking you know everything about *everything*, when really all you know about is you and your friends!’

They worked on for a while in companionable silence. Above them the last swallows and house martins wheeled in the blue autumn sky, eating as

many insects as they could to give them energy for their long flight to Africa.

‘These last few days it’s felt like something’s in the air, hasn’t it?’ said Sorrel, after a while. ‘I can’t quite put my finger on it. Maybe it’s just the conkers, and the colder evenings.’

Like all wild creatures, the Hidden Folk can sense the turning of the seasons, just as ladybirds know when to hibernate, and frogs know when to breed.

‘I know what you mean,’ said Moss. ‘And I don’t think we’re the only ones. Burnet seemed very quiet last night, when we were trapping crickets.’

‘Yes,’ said Sorrel thoughtfully. ‘I think we’re all feeling the same, even Cumulus. Change is in the air. It’s time.’



When the conker bowls had been polished to a high gloss inside and out, they looked beautiful. Moss carried them carefully as they set out on the familiar route from the little park to Mac and Min’s place. At the block of flats a grating led into a dark passageway beneath the ground-floor stairwell; then they crept through the ducts, gaps and corridors that ran below and around the Mortals’ flats,

arriving at last at the Hobs' cosy dwelling, which was warmed by a copper water pipe. It felt so lovely and welcoming, and for a moment Moss felt stricken at the idea that they must soon set out again, into the unknown.

'Hello, you two! No Burnet with you this evening?' said Macadam. 'That's a shame. What have you got there?'

Smiling, Moss presented the bowls to Mac and Min, who were delighted.

'How extraordinary. You must tell us how you made them!' said Mac.

'Thank you - we'll treasure them for ever!' said Min. 'Now, are you two hungry? You're just in time for dinner - come and eat.'

The dinner table was the Hobs' pride and joy. A paperback book stood on two empty matchboxes; the cover showed a picture of a red train and a Mortal boy wearing spectacles. There was some lettering, too, which meant nothing to any of them, though they did often wonder about the boy and sometimes made up stories about him after dinner, to pass the time.

Sorrel had had the excellent idea of giving all the Faders a hat to wear so that people would know where their faces were, so above one of the cork

stools floated a conical pencil shaving, showing where Cumulus was – a fitting replacement for the hat which had blown off when they were riding on pigeons, high above the Hive. Taking a stool next to Dormer, a Hob who lived in the stockroom of a nearby corner shop, Moss wondered how much time they had left before old Cumulus vanished completely. It was a chilling thought.

Mac and Min brought the food and set it down on the table. There was some cheesy pasta pinched from the flat's kitchen, and some bits of apple and plum for dessert. Burnet had taught the Hobs what grew in each season, and now the couple regularly foraged outdoors. There was a lot of wild food in the Hive if you knew where to look for it, and it was full of all sorts of interesting creatures, too.

Just as they were about to eat, there was a cry of 'Hello-hello!' and Burnet bustled in, bringing the delicious fragrance of a September evening. When summer comes to a close and the equinox approaches, you can smell it on the air. Instead of flowers and grass, beneath the usual traffic smell of the Hive was the subtle, autumnal aroma of mushrooms and fallen leaves. For while spring is all about growth, autumn is about decay – and decay is extremely important, because it makes new soil for next year.

‘There you are at last!’ cried Min. ‘Sit down, sit down. Are you hungry?’

‘*Starving*,’ said Burnet, immediately tucking in – and they all followed suit. For a while, the only sounds were munching, but it wasn’t long before the conversation resumed.

‘So I’ve come up with an Excellent Plan,’ said Burnet, through a mouthful of cheesy pasta. This came as no surprise to anyone: while Moss had been recovering from the encounter with the cat, Burnet had been spending a lot of time with Spangle and Vesper the sleek city fox. They’d all known their friend was up to something.

‘As you all know, I’ve been spending a lot of time with Spangle and Vesper,’ continued Burnet, unnecessarily. ‘And between the three of us, we think we’ve worked out how we can get from here back to Ash Row – when everyone’s quite ready, that is.’

‘Are we going by pigeon-power again?’ asked Moss, who, despite an initial fear of flying, now looked back on their flight with the birds as the happiest of memories.

‘We don’t need to,’ replied Burnet. ‘We’re actually a lot closer than you’d think. You see, during the hundreds of cuckoo summers that we lived in

the ash tree, the Hive got bigger and bigger, until it crept quite close to us. We didn't realize it, because we didn't leave the garden for all that time. When we *did* leave to look for our cousins, we journeyed with the deer in the opposite direction to the Hive, deep into the countryside. Then, of course, we travelled by pigeon to where we are now – and as it turns out, we could well have flown over our old garden! Honestly, it's true. Spangle's been on a recce and worked it out.'

'So . . . we can just walk there?' asked Sorrel, sounding almost disappointed. 'And you don't need me to invent anything?'

'Not quite,' said Burnet. 'Here's the plan. We're going to walk the first bit, along some kind of huge metal pathway Vesper's told me about – but don't worry, Moss, she's going to come with us, to show us the way and keep us safe from cats. The next stage we can do by water. There's a river that passes very close to Ash Row, and flows on to the sea. Sorrel, start thinking about how we can sail on it. Because that'll get us almost all the way home!'

Everyone started talking excitedly, except Cumulus and Dormer, who looked thoughtful. At last, Dormer spoke up.

'I was wondering . . . it's just that I'd miss Moss

so much, and . . . well, would it perhaps be all right if I came too?’

‘I don’t think that’s—’ began Burnet, but just then Cumulus’s voice came from under the pencil-shaving hat.

‘I think that’s an *excellent* idea, Dormer. As a Hob, you know a lot about Mortals and Mortal-made things. You’ll be invaluable on the journey, especially as’ – and here their old friend could be heard to swallow hard – ‘especially as I won’t be going with you.’

Moss’s eyes filled with tears, and Sorrel gasped.

‘These last few weeks it’s felt as though I’m somehow . . . not quite here, I suppose,’ continued Cumulus. ‘Dear friends, my travelling days are over. You must all go on without me, but you must never, *ever* give up on our quest to find a new role for our people, so we can stay in the Wild World for ever – do you promise? Because the truth is, I’m going to stay here in the Hive, with Mac and Min. For good.’