



By
Ash,
Oak and
Thorn

MELISSA
HARRISON

Chicken
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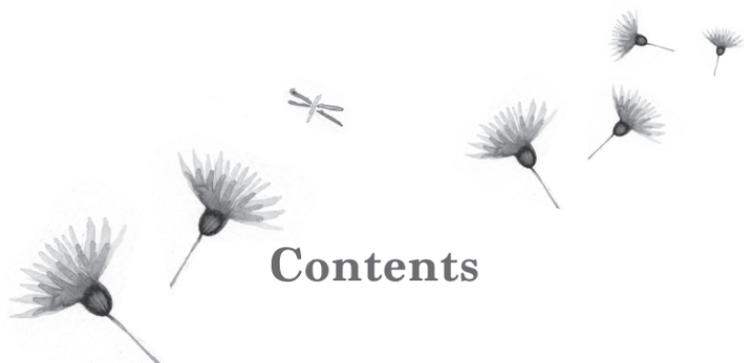
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*We peer between the intricate stems
of the grass forests and see the
ground-floor people about their
business of living: grasshoppers, ants,
beetles and a host of tiny creatures
that hurry this way and that . . .*

*B.B., from the preface to
The Wild Lone: The Story
of a Pytchley Fox*





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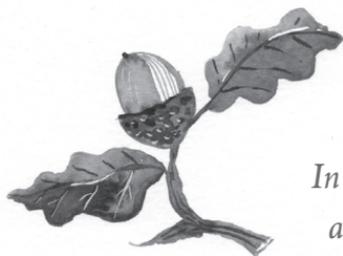
ASH



1

A spring morning

*In which we meet Moss, Burnet
and Cumulus, and a peculiar
thing is discovered.*



It was the kind of March day that feels springish, despite the weather not yet having warmed up: yellow crocuses bloomed on the verges, the leafless hedges were sprinkled with buds like tiny green fairy lights about to be switched on, and the sky was very blue. That kind of day only comes at the very tail end of winter, and it makes everything feel fizzy and exciting. It was just the sort of day for something unusual to occur.

In the garden of 52 Ash Row, next to the trampoline, was an ancient tree with an interesting-looking hole at the bottom of its trunk. Soon it would put out fresh new leaves and some frilly, green-and-burgundy flowers, and then become a tall green castle with a thousand things living secretly in it - and soon after that, summer would

come. But for now, the old tree was leafless, and would remain so for many days to come.

The lawn around it was smooth and green, without any daisies or dandelions, and near the house the earth had been covered up with wooden decking. But through the neat and narrow flower beds around the edges of the garden wound secret paths made by wild creatures – some of them known to humans, and some not at all.

A blackbird flew in from next door's garden and landed on one of the lower twigs of the ash, which bobbed under his weight. Then he opened his yellow beak and sang for the very first time since the summer holidays last year, warbling loudly to anyone who cared to listen: *Yes, hello, would you believe it, can I just have your attention please, thank you all for listening, I just wanted to mention . . . that it's SPRING!*

At that exact moment, something appeared in the interesting-looking hole in the old tree's trunk. If Maya and Ben, who lived at number 52, had happened to be nearby, they would have thought it was just some bird or other; but they were at school and knew nothing about it – and anyway they weren't really the noticing (or the listening) types. They hadn't yet discovered that the first blackbird song of spring is the signal for an ancient race of

tiny people known as the Hidden Folk to wake from their winter sleep, or that for more than two whole centuries – long before the house or its garden even existed – the ash tree in their garden had had three of these secretive creatures living in its gnarled and hollow trunk.

Out into the sunshine stepped a figure about as tall as your hand is long, with nut-brown skin. Moss (for that was the person's name) was wearing an outfit made of waterproof onion skin, the trousers held up by a red string belt, a cap made from an acorn cup with the twig still jauntily attached, and no shoes.

'Hello, Mr B,' said Moss, squinting up to where the blackbird still warbled. 'Did you have a good winter?'

'Oh, there you are!' said the blackbird, hopping down from his twig to the lawn. 'Hello, Moss. Not bad, thanks for asking, though one could always do with a few more worms, don't you find? Are you all well in there? Did you have a good sleep?'

'Yes, we're all well, thank you. I expect the others will be up and about before long. How's Mrs B, is she all right?'

Just then another little figure stepped out of the hole in the tree, yawning and rubbing its eyes.

Burnet, who was a little bit broader than Moss and a few centuries older, wore a sort of kilt and a fancy waistcoat made from the shed skin of an adder, and carried a much-sharpened metal blade on which the legend STANLEY could still be read – though who Stanley was is anyone’s guess. A restless, outdoors kind of person, Burnet was the type who always likes to be up and doing, and finds it terribly hard to be quiet or sit still.

‘Morning, all. Well, well, well, another spring! Do you know, I could really do with a proper adventure. I get incredibly bored sometimes, don’t you? We haven’t even been out of this garden in, ooh, nearly a hundred cuckoo summers!’ (A ‘cuckoo summer’ is the Hidden Folk’s term for a year – though, come to think of it, none of them had heard a cuckoo in summer for quite a long time.)

‘Blimey!’ said the blackbird, whose first name was Bob (though nobody used it). ‘A hundred cuckoo summers is a long time to stay in one place. D’you mean you haven’t ever been next door, where all the bird feeders are? You really should. And you’ve never seen the place where all the children spend the day? It’s amazing – at lunchtime they drop all sorts of interesting things to eat, like rice cakes, and raisins, bits of apple . . .’

‘And chips!’ came a warble from a nearby twig, where a starling had just landed with an unnecessary flourish. ‘All right, everyone?’

‘Hi, Spangle!’ laughed Moss and Burnet together. They were both so pleased the cheeky little bird had made it safely back from the starlings’ winter conference on the east coast.

‘Mmmm, *chips* . . .’ said Bob dreamily.

‘You all right there, Mr B?’ said Spangle. Compared to the soberly feathered blackbird, the cheeky starling was resplendent in his spring plumage, which shimmered as iridescent as petrol in a puddle and was covered in little white arrows.

‘Oh, sorry. Hello, Spangle,’ said Bob. ‘Don’t you look smart?’

‘That is correct. Now, what’s occurring?’ asked the starling, settling his feathers and fixing them all with a beady eye.

‘Mr B was just saying we should get out more,’ explained Moss. ‘But we don’t have wings like you two – it’s not so easy for us to go exploring. Especially if we want to be home in time for bed, which I do.’

‘He’s not wrong, though – there’s a lot to see round these ends,’ said Spangle. ‘I know you’re all, like, *settled* and *safe* in Ash Row, but there’s a big

Wild World out there, you get me? Not to mention next door.’

‘Is Cumulus awake yet?’ asked Moss, to change the subject, for all the talk of exploring and adventuring was making Burnet look extremely restless. ‘It’s such a beautiful spring day, I’d hate anyone to miss out.’

And then there were three little figures gathered at the base of the old ash in the corner of the garden – which is an extraordinary thing when you think about it, though most humans don’t. There they were, as plain as day: Moss, the youngest, in onion-skin outfit and acorn-cup hat; broad Burnet in kilt and snakeskin waistcoat, carrying a trusty ‘Stanley’ knife; and now the oldest (and wisest) of the trio, Cumulus, who had only one eye and long white hair, and wore a crumpled green robe and matching hat. None wore shoes, for the soles of their feet were tough and usefully calloused; their legs and arms were hairy, for warmth.

‘At last! Hello, Cumulus!’ cried Burnet, offering their ancient friend a hug.

‘Happy spring!’ said Moss, smiling. But Cumulus’s face looked serious, rather than cheerful.

‘Good morning, everyone. I’m sorry to say that something rather worrying has happened . . .’

But just then, Bob took off, clucking and shouting hysterically in that alarming way blackbirds have, skimming over the garden fence and making for next-door's tangled shrubs.

'By the great god Pan! What's got into *him*?' exclaimed Moss – but then they heard it too: the back door swinging open, and someone coming out. Spangle followed the blackbird over the fence, while the three little figures whisked themselves into the hole in the ash tree's trunk.

Inside, everything was perfectly shipshape. The floor was of beaten earth, regularly swept clean by Moss with a soft broom made from a wood-pigeon's tail feather (Moss was very house-proud, unlike Burnet). In the centre was a beautiful round mat newly woven each autumn from long strands of dry grass. The lofty chamber extended up into the ash trunk, which had become quite hollow over the years; although that's perfectly normal in old trees, this one was also ill with a new disease caused by a fungus – though nobody knew that yet.

Lower down, the walls had been cleverly fitted with all sorts of tiny cupboards and cabinets in which the trio kept their belongings, including their three sleeping bags woven from spider silk and stuffed with the soft white fluff that blows off

poplar trees each spring. At the very back of the room was a stack of snail shells, each with a neat wooden bung and label showing the date. They contained an excellent cordial made from windfall fruit and wild flowers, only to be enjoyed on very special occasions.

‘You were saying . . . ?’ said Moss to Cumulus.

‘Yes. So the thing is – I don’t want to worry either of you, and it doesn’t hurt or anything, but . . .’

Cumulus held up one hand – and Moss and Burnet gasped, for the shaft of sunlight from the open door shone straight through it. The green sleeve of Cumulus’s robe was there, and the wrist, but the palm had become slightly transparent, and the fingertips could barely be seen at all.

‘Pan protect us,’ whispered Burnet.

‘Odd, isn’t it?’ said Cumulus. ‘I noticed it as soon as I woke up. My hand is still there. I can still hold things, and – I don’t know – secretly pick my nose or whatever. I just seem to be, well . . . fading away.’